

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric scene. At the top, a bridge with a complex metal truss structure spans across the frame. Below the bridge, a river flows. On the right bank, a person stands on a rock, holding a flashlight that casts a bright beam of light onto the water. In the center of the river, a car is partially submerged, its roof and upper windows visible above the water's surface. The water is dark and reflects the light from the flashlight. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greens, and browns, with a strong yellow light source from the flashlight.

**JOHN W MEFFORD**

**AT  
LAST**

**AN  
ALEX TROUTT  
THRILLER**

# AT Last

*An Alex Troutt Thriller*

Book 6

Redemption Thriller Series - 6  
(Includes Alex Troutt Thrillers, Ivy Nash Thrillers  
and Ozzie Novak Thrillers)

By  
John W. Mefford

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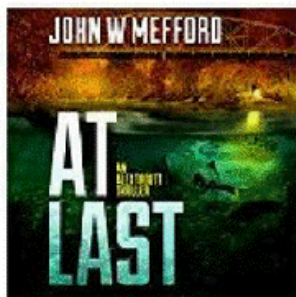
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*Alex at Six Years Old*

The trembling was uncontrollable. I wrapped my arms around my torso until my fingers gripped either side of my back. When I heard what sounded like a jackhammer reverberating in my head, I realized my teeth were chattering so fast I'd forgotten to breathe.

I was cold. So cold my bones ached. What little air that escaped my lungs came out as white puffs of smoke, like an old-fashioned locomotive.

But I was going nowhere. With my feet seemingly cast in stone in the middle of the frozen foods section at a grocery in Virginia Beach, all I could do was stare. Stare at my mother, relentless in her chanting and preaching at this poor woman trying to corral two toddlers. Black and blue circles hung under the woman's eyes, almost like she'd been punched in the face. A cloth diaper was draped over a shoulder, but I could still make out what looked like vomit stains all over her extra-large sweatshirt.

"Why are you doing this to me?" The woman splayed her arms, a vertical line splitting the area between her eyes. She seemed anxious and annoyed. Mom had a tendency to do that to people, especially when we were out running errands, like today. I'd seen this same scenario play out a hundred times. While I inwardly cringed as Mom humiliated people—telling them they'd go straight to hell if they didn't mend their ways—the feeling that dominated my thoughts was simple: relief. I knew that was selfish of me, but I had to admit to myself that Mom's relentless harassment of this lady served as a temporary diversion from me. And I needed a break every once in a while. Just a few minutes to build myself back up. To not think *I* was going straight to hell if I wasn't perfect every minute of every day, or at least perfect in her mind. The problem was, her perfection seemed like a moving target. I could never quite figure out what she wanted from me.

"'All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away.' That is a scripture from Isaiah," Mom said, her eyes half-closed as she rested her spindly fingers on the woman's shoulder. And then she immediately began to chant. It was impossible to understand what she was chanting, even though I'd heard it a thousand times, both in public and at home, staring at the cross by the fireplace, rocking back and forth. As I'd told Dad, it sounded like gibberish, like a strange language from another planet.

The woman shook her head, her perplexed eyes narrowing at Mom as one of her kids pulled at her sweatpants, the other grabbing a cereal box off a display. A moment later, a pyramid of cereal boxes tumbled to the floor.

"It takes a strong woman to raise kids the right way. To lead them down

the path of happiness and serenity,” Mom said, now pointing a crooked finger at the kid, who was squatting on the floor, ripping into a box of Cocoa Puffs. I wish I had Cocoa Puffs. I didn’t often get the chance to eat chocolate cereal. Well, only when Dad fed me breakfast when Mom was off doing her weird chanting thing.

Mom didn’t stop there. “Wild kids...kids with no moral values—”

“Are you actually telling me that my kids are immoral?” The woman was angry, and I could see her breathing harder and harder as she cocked her head to the side.

Oh crap. Mom had taken it too far...again. I had to do something, even if it meant her negative attention would focus back on me.

“Mom, I need to use the restroom, please,” I blurted out.

She turned and looked at me. “Alexandra, young ladies shouldn’t use those words in public. Please keep that to yourself. Do you understand?”

“But, Mom, I really gotta go.” I jumped up and down once.

She drew her lips together, and they became tight and wrinkled.

“Okay, I’ll wait,” I said meekly, lowering my head.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see the little kid shoveling a handful of Cocoa Puffs into his mouth. It was hard not to giggle.

Mom flipped back around and put both hands on her waist while the other woman walked over and tried to clean up the mess. Meanwhile, the other small child was now poking his fingers into a pack of hamburger meat. I cracked a smile but also noticed a few people stopping their carts and looking at all of us. It was obvious they saw us as freaks. *They’re right.*

“Immorality is only achieved if you’re weak enough to let the devil run your life,” Mom said as if she were speaking from the top of some mountain. Then she took two steps to our cart, plucked her Bible out of her purse, and held it high above her head. “The word of God, the pages in this book...it’s all you need to repent, for yourself and for your kids.”

“Stop talking to me, you crazy woman.” The kids’ mom dabbed the diaper against the moisture collecting just above her lip, which puzzled me. As engines hummed all around me, it felt like it was thirty degrees.

The woman kept talking. “Can’t you see I need help and all you’re doing is making it ten times more difficult?” She swooped up the youngest kid just as he shoved more cereal into his mouth. Then he started to whine.

“I mean you no harm, but it’s obvious that I’ve been chosen to guide the helpless sheep.”

“And now you’re saying I’m helpless?” The woman perched herself just under Mom’s pointy chin. “You better back off, lady, or I’m—”

Mom let out a derisive gasp. “If you could see yourself, you would be ashamed, and you would run, not walk, to your house and get down on your knees and pray that God will somehow bless you with an abundance of morality—something you are lacking. I pity you.”

A buzz of voices sounded from the growing number of people gathering

around us. In that group, I also noticed two grocery employees pointing at Mom.

“Where do you get the nerve to talk down to me?” The woman flipped a loose strand of hair out of her face, which now looked like a ripe tomato.

Mom raised the Bible over the lady’s head and said, “As it states in Proverbs, ‘Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.’”

I could see the woman’s teeth as she leered at Mom, her eyes shooting invisible darts. She momentarily glanced at me then returned her glare to Mom. “You are a mother. You should know what this is all about. I pity *her* for having a mother like you. Come on, kids, let’s get the hell out of this place.”

She placed her kids in the cart and marched away, although her eyes stayed on Mom until she disappeared down an aisle. There were now about ten people standing around, whispering. I tried my best to ignore the open box of cereal as my mom set it in our cart.

I couldn’t keep myself from asking, “Does this mean I get to have Cocoa Puffs?”

“Of course, not, Alexandra. We’ll drop it off at a food bank.”

That was Mom. She was full of contempt for everyone around her, but at the same time, she recognized the need to help those who were down on their luck. I didn’t understand her, not when she was forcing her beliefs on regular people who seemed like they were just trying to get by. And not when we were at home trying to be a regular family.

When witnessing previous confrontations, I used to hide on the bottom of the cart, covering my eyes, pretending no one could see me. It was my way of coping with the embarrassment. As I got older, I realized two things: people could still see me, and Mom would never change.

Without saying another word, I ignored the stares and finger-pointing and pushed the cart behind Mom as we made our way into the fresh fruits and vegetables section. As usual, Mom mumbled some prayer over each food item before she set it in the cart.

“Come on, Alexandra, you’re old enough to understand how important it is to bless our food.”

Apparently she thought my stares meant I was actually paying attention to the words she spoke. But I was more mindful of her expressions and demeanor, and how people responded to her judgmental comments.

“Do I have to? I’m not even sure what I should say.”

She pressed her lips together again, and I tensed up, knowing another threat was headed my way.

“Well, aren’t you the cutest little guy in the grocery store?” An old woman appeared at our cart.

This had happened before, where someone thought I was a boy. Mom made me cut my hair really short, and I had chubby cheeks. My clothes were

either too big or too small. Not surprising since she picked them up at Goodwill. I once overheard Dad ask her why she dressed me like a boy, but she insisted on calling me Alexandra and not the name I preferred, Alex. She gave him some answer that made no sense to me. I remember watching his hands fall against his pants, and then he walked away. He seemed as puzzled by her behavior and answers as I did. And he was old.

“This is my daughter. Alexandra is her name,” Mom said.

The lady gave me an awkward smile. One of her front teeth was gold, which kind of creeped me out. She walked away, and we finally finished our shopping.

As the grocery clerk rang up the groceries, Mom spoke to the redheaded bag boy. I heard a lot of “yes ma’ams” and “no ma’ams,” but I mostly just watched the lady with the lightning-fast fingers. She smiled at me and seemed like a nice person.

We paid, and I pushed the cart down the long aisle in front of the registers toward the doors. I even jumped onto the little bar at the bottom and let the cart glide a few feet without Mom seeing me.

“Alexandra,” she said, pulling her gloves out of her purse.

I quickly jumped off the cart, thinking that she had eyes in the back of her head.

“Yes, Mom?”

“Would you like for me to take you shopping? Maybe a nice dress for Thanksgiving dinner so you don’t have to wear the same one from last year?”

“I don’t know. I’m not really into dresses.”

“Pffft. I just don’t understand you, Alexandra. I could see you don’t like to be called a boy, and now I offer to buy you a dress and you don’t want it. I guess I’ve just spoiled you too much.”

“Mom, I just want normal clothes, like the other kids at school. You know, a pair of jeans that fit me, a sweater, and maybe some sneakers so I can run faster than all of those boys.”

She didn’t look at me, but I could see her face scrunch into a ball of disapproval...of me, of what I thought was important. It made me sad.

The grocery’s sliding doors magically opened, and a gust of cold wind sent a shiver up my spine.

I was about to hop back onto the cart for another ride when Mom put a hand on it, stopping me in my tracks. “Wait here,” she said just before we were about to step into the parking lot.

I turned to see her walking toward two men who were standing next to one of those enormous concrete pillars. Both wore dark coats. The short man had a round face, with folds of skin outlining his neck. Kind of reminded me of Jabba the Hutt. I had a lot of those Star Wars toys at home, stored away in a bin at the top of Mom’s closet. She didn’t like me playing with toys that showed a world of evil people who were so easily recognizable. She said that in the real world, you could never tell who an evil person was, not by the way



they looked. I also heard her tell Dad that Princess Leia was a whore. I assumed it had something to do with the tiny bikini she wore in episode six. Dad let me see all of the movies, and when Mom wasn't around, he sometimes brought the toys down and let me play with them.

The short man adjusted silver-rimmed glasses as Mom approached them. He looked my way and held his glare for a second. My breath caught in the back of my throat. Those were mean eyes. I quickly started to rummage through the bags of groceries, pretending I was looking for something in particular. I'd seen Mom do this once when she was pretending she didn't see our neighbor. She wasn't very social most of the time, except when she was around people from church. Even then, she never seemed happy or content.

My head was down, but I was still able to peek upward. I could see Mom's lips moving, the short guy now staring at her. Mom shifted a bit to her right, and I got a better view of the other man. He would have glowed in the dark. With skin the color of wet sand, his hair was so blond it was almost solid white. I wondered if he used lemons to bleach it. I heard some of the older girls at school talking about how they wanted to do that. I didn't need to. My hair was already blond. I only hoped that someday I'd be allowed to look like Alex, just a normal-looking girl.

A gust of wind carried their voices. Blondie did most of the talking, his tone direct and biting.

"Do you not understand why God put you on this earth, Charlotte?"

I laughed to myself when I heard her name. Dad usually called her Charlie, at least when he wasn't calling her Mrs. T, trying to get a rise out of her. If I thought real hard, there might have been one time when Dad got Mom to smile. He didn't see me peeking into the kitchen, but I saw him pat her on her bottom, like he was giving her a spanking. He then took her in his arms and gave her a kiss. My eyes forgot to blink. I was grossed out, but also excited to see my parents actually having some fun together and joking around. It hardly ever happened.

"Charlotte, your purpose. Can you not recite to me what it is?" Blondie said as the muscles in his jaw wiggled.

Mom's lips moved more, but I couldn't pick up what she was saying. She brought her hand to her mouth. Was she upset? I could feel my stomach start to swirl, as if I might get sick, like I did sometimes when I was out on Dad's boat in the Atlantic Ocean and we were caught in a storm.

I swallowed and tried not to think about it. I couldn't help but stare at Blondie's face. He seemed familiar, but at the same time, someone I would want to stay away from. He reminded me of someone on one of those Hollywood magazine covers that Mom would repeatedly rebuke while we waited at the grocery checkout line. But Blondie didn't appear to be happy, and it was pretty obvious he wasn't being nice to Mom.

Turning to look around for anyone else, I saw a man and his wife walking toward the entrance at the other end of the grocery, their shoulders scrunched

up to cover most of their faces. Again, I looked over at Mom, and I could see her head rocking front and back. I took a step in her direction.

Suddenly, the sliding doors behind me opened. I looked up and realized I had stepped too close. The doors had seen me and decided to open. Mom and both of her friends then looked at me.

“Alexandra, stay at the cart like I told you. Don’t disobey me, or I’ll have to punish you.”

I nodded and shuffled backward a step.

“Oh, look out there, little girl.”

I had almost run into a store employee, a man with a mustache and one of those white shirts with a name tag on it.

“Sorry,” I said.

He looked toward the parking lot, then turned back to face me. I just stood there.

“Your mom or dad around?”

I swatted a hand over my shoulder. “Yes sir. That’s my mom over there, talking to those men,” I said with little energy.

He blew into his hand and looked in Mom’s direction. “Is everything okay?” he asked me.

I considered my options. I really wanted to tell him that I was worried about Mom, and even me. Those two men weren’t nice. But if I said what I was thinking, then I’d probably get in huge trouble and be banned to my room for a week straight. On top of that, I usually didn’t share anything with anyone. Well, anyone except my pet turtle that I found on the beach. His name was Speedy.

“I’m fine. Just bored. Mom’s just having one of those adult conversations,” I said, cupping my hand to the side of my mouth so Mom wouldn’t hear me.

“I see. Well, if you need to warm up, you can always come back into the store and wait for her there. I’ll even buy you a cup of hot chocolate.”

I could see the man’s smile under his thick mustache. I glanced over my shoulder and thought about it.

“Eh, I better not. Mom likes for me to stay close.”

“Okay, then,” he said. He shot another look at Mom and the two men. “I’m going back inside. Hope they finish before you turn into an icicle.”

I waved goodbye and found a crack in the sidewalk that seemed interesting. The shape reminded me of a design I’d etched in the sand using a stick, and then a wave had crashed onto the shore and wiped it away.

“Let us pray,” I heard the man say, and I flipped around to look at Mom. She had shifted her position a bit, and I could see all their eyes. They were shut, and Blondie was speaking so softly I couldn’t hear him anymore. He held a book in his hands. Mom and the short guy both rested a hand on that book. I guess it was a Bible. The cover was a dingy red, and I could see threads hanging out from the binding.

“Amen,” the man said.

Mom turned back to me, but the man grabbed her wrist, and her neck snapped back to face him.

“Mom!” I yelled out instinctively.

The short, pudgy man moved between me and my mom. I could hardly see her.

“The work of the Lord is serious business, Charlotte. Are you ready to accept the challenge?” Blondie asked.

Scooting to my left, I could see Mom’s face. It was somber, and her neck had red splotches. It only got that way when she was really upset. She paused for a second, and I eyed the man’s grip on her wrist. It was tight, and he wasn’t loosening it. He was just a big bully!

“Let go of my mom!” I yelled before I even realized what I was doing. The short man turned around and leaned over. “Why don’t you go back and put your hands on the cart, and Mommy will be done when she’s done? Get along now.” He waved me away. I ignored the man’s advice and stepped closer. “Mom, are you okay?”

She turned toward me, and for a brief second she dropped her stern appearance, as if her eyes were reaching out to me, telling me that she loved me.

“Mom!”

Blondie jerked her arm again. “I need an answer, Charlotte. Now.”

A plastic grocery bag swooped across my vision, the gusts of wind now kicking up sand and small rocks. I covered my eyes with my hand, but tried to not lose eye contact with my mom.

She stood like a statue, unaffected by the wind. I could see her swallow once. After what seemed like an hour, I heard her say, “You have my word.”

Blondie unhooked his grip, and Mom stumbled a couple of steps before regaining her balance. Quickly, her composure returned, and she walked toward me, holding out her hand. I grabbed hold and squeezed like my life depended on it. I looked up, and she curled a loose strand of hair around her ear, her eyes blinking several times. Even though she had that familiar regal look, something was off. As we reached the car, I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder one more time. Blondie was walking away, but staring right at me. His eyes were piercing, penetrating. He had a look I’d never seen before.

The look of evil.

That night, I wet my bed for the first time since I was a baby.

*Present Day*

I could feel the thud of my heartbeat, and that was when I knew I was awake.

Lying face down on a mattress with a pillow covering my head, a loose spring poked my rib cage. I took a couple of audible sniffs and picked up a waft of something foul.

Then I suddenly felt the urge to pee, and I kicked at the covers. The sheet somehow twisted around my calves and ankles, as if I had just stepped into some type of bear trap. I tried pulling on the sheets, but they were taut.

“This is fucking ridiculous,” I said to no one in my motel room. I blew a strand of hair out of my face, took in a breath, and then whipped my legs up and down as if I were trying to chase down Brad in one of our infamous off-road bike races.

*I wish.*

Another burst of energy, and my legs were in full-on spastic mode. Before I knew it, I’d fallen off the bed, my legs still twisted in an unforgiving knot. I almost chuckled out loud. The knot reminded me of when Dad used to show me how to tie knots for a sailboat. The bowline knot. That was the one I recalled the best.

A lump formed in my throat as a flurry of images blitzed through my mind. Some made me smile, but so many others only brought back a familiar feeling of pain, and even shame. I glanced up at the clock and realized I couldn’t put it off any longer.

I had a funeral to get to.

But first I needed to pee. Bad.

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The headstone was simple and clean. The letters and numbers had probably just been carved in the last couple of days. The sand-whipped winds invaded my mouth, and I could feel the familiar grit between my teeth, just like when I was a kid running around Port Isabel. A low ceiling of gray clouds raced across the sky, as if they had somewhere to go. Their pace was the antithesis to the proceedings, which were slow and plodding. Final.

Donald S. Troutt, former Coast Guard captain, my dad for the last thirty-nine plus years, had died of congestive heart failure a week earlier. It was sudden, but not unexpected. I always figured he’d throw me one more curveball on his way out of my life for good. We hadn’t spoken since summer vacation a few months earlier, when I found him neck-deep in a drug-smuggling ring that was connected to a number of killings in the area, including one of my old high school friends. His repeated poor decision-making over the years had created many embarrassing situations, but nothing

like this past summer. His actions were reprehensible. Erin and Luke, my two children and the most precious jewels on the earth, witnessed my friend's death up close, while also being dangerously close to two drive-by shootings. By the time Dad finally confessed to the degree of his involvement—laden with one excuse after another—I couldn't bear to be around the man. I left him and his girlfriend, Carly, who had pulled him into the seedy world of drug smuggling, to work with authorities and lawyers to figure out how they could avoid prison time.

As I glanced around the circle of people at the graveside service, I didn't recognize many familiar faces. A few folks from our old neighborhood—the ones who generally knew about Dad's constant battle with the bottle and all the related demons. My old high school boyfriend, Mario. And of course, the bitch. Yeah, Carly I could do without. Dressed in all black, including a veil netting covering most of her face, the woman was putting on a show. She produced tears at all the right moments and eagerly volunteered to formally accept the folded American flag from a Coast Guard officer. An extension of her act could have been part of a burlesque show. She wore a little black dress, so little in fact that it didn't even reach mid-thigh. And at the exact moment the uniformed officer was handing her the flag, she spread her legs for the world to see.

*Classy Carly.* That could be my name for her. It would allow me to avoid a barrage of four-letter descriptors.

She was a selfish, money-grubbing leech, or was it a more accurate representation to call her a vulture now that Dad had finally died? If there was money to be found, Carly would sniff it out faster than any drug-sniffing dog in the DEA.

I glanced over at Mario just as the preacher asked everyone to bow their heads and pray. His presence gave me a little sense of calm. He had been the key cog in the DEA's undercover operation and instrumental in helping to identify and apprehend the leaders of the drug cartel, the ones who had brought so much violence to the Rio Grande Valley. As a recovering drug addict, and someone with children of his own, he'd become a strong advocate to remove the lure of drugs from the Valley.

The preacher closed out the service with a few words of his own, and then he gave each of us a chance to walk by the casket and pay our respects. A few folks placed roses on the top of the casket, and soon there were only two people left near the open hole where Dad would be buried: Carly and me. Even though she had on mirrored sunglasses, I just stared at her. Finally, she relented and took the cue to go in front of me.

She got down on her knees and interlocked her fingers. Tears flowed, which brought a few gasps from the crowd that had lingered nearby. She seemed to be saying a few words. I tried not to read her lips. Moving with the grace and speed of a woman three times her age, she lifted to her feet and padded away.

A number of heads turned toward me, but I didn't acknowledge them. Part of me didn't want to offer any heartfelt respect to the man who had let me down so many times...but he'd also been both my personal tennis coach and the only parent to show me any love.

*Then why was I being so harsh?*

A feeling of guilt swept across my body for letting my anger and resentment get the best of me. I took a few steps forward, leaned over, and touched the top of the casket. Then my chin dropped to my chest, and my breath began to flutter. I couldn't stop myself from crying.

A moment later, or maybe longer, I felt a gentle hand on my elbow.

"Alex, you okay?"

It was Mario, with his sympathetic and caring eyes.

"Uh...sorry. Just got wrapped up in the moment."

"No, that's completely okay. Just want to make sure you don't need anything. You can stay here all day if you like. I won't leave you here."

Another wave of emotion. Glancing back down at the casket, I thought I knew why I was so emotional. It was the finality of my family. Mom had died years ago when I was just seven, leaving Dad and me to figure out life. While we'd had our moments, it wasn't a very healthy environment, to say the least. He was drunk or depressed half the time, either over Mom dying or some other type of drama.

I turned back to Mario and offered him a faint smile. "Thank you for being here, Mario." He would never be anything more than a friend, but at least he represented one of the few positive memories from my younger life. One of the good guys.

He took my hand, and we walked to a clearing, where we turned to watch two cemetery workers lower the casket into the ground.

I could hear a few whimpers behind me. I think one of them was Carly, no doubt putting an exclamation on her performance.

"You think she could be any more of a drama queen?" Mario whispered in my ear.

I smiled through my tears, recalling how much Mario and I typically thought the same thing, even if we never said a word out loud. It was kind of funny. He seemed more like a twin brother than a former boyfriend from umpteen years earlier.

"You ready to get out of here?" he asked.

I nodded and turned to follow Mario but almost bumped into Carly, who had just lifted her veil and removed her sunglasses.

"Alex, I'm..." she released a gasp, "I'm so sorry for your...loss."

Shifting my eyes to Mario, he gave me a slight nod. He was telling me to keep my response muted.

I cleared my throat, giving me a couple of extra seconds to focus my thoughts on keeping peace. "Thank you, Carly. I'm sure this hasn't been easy on you."

She pursed her lips, then put her hand on my shoulder. I looked down at her hand as if it carried some type of deadly disease.

"I know we haven't seen eye to eye about everything, but I know how much you cared about your father."

I responded with a single nod while pressing my lips together.

"He had his faults—who doesn't, right?" she said, with far too big of a smile. "But he was a good man. Yes, a good man indeed."

One more glance over at Mario. He gave me another encouraging nod.

"I think he tried to be a good father. It was just tough on him. Mom dying, and then his battle with alcoholism. But I have to admit, we had some good times."

She hesitated for a second, as if she were deciding whether she should jump down my throat or just take it for what it was: my best attempt at being courteous without slandering the person right in front of me.

She patted my upper arm, and I stared at her hand again.

"Your father saw himself in you," she said.

I gave her a look of indignation. Was she blowing smoke up my hoo-hah? I couldn't understand her motivation, so I said nothing.

"He said you were driven to be the best at whatever you tried."

I nodded slowly, wondering how that mimicked Dad's behavior.

"Oh...I can see you're probably focused on how your dad acted in his later years. Well, when he was younger, he said he put his heart and soul into two things: the Coast Guard and his family."

Family. In some respects, it sounded like an abstract word. It was something I had always craved growing up, but never really felt. It was why I valued my kids and Ezzy, our nanny and one of my dearest friends. And now, I suppose, Brad was edging himself into our tight-knit group.

I looked into Carly's eyes, and for the first time since I'd stepped back into Texas, I tried to push aside the bitterness and just accept things as they were. Even including Carly.

"That's nice of you to say, Carly. Thank you."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. "I never meant to hurt your father, to bring him into my whacked-out world. But he had a kind soul. And there aren't too many people in this world who can say that."

She pulled me in and hugged me. I tried to reciprocate, but she squeezed so hard it was difficult to breathe. Someone called her name from the area where the cars were parked, and she quickly let go of me.

"If you ever want a place to stay when you and the kids come back for vacation, you're welcome to stay with me."

Was she serious? I would feel more comfortable asking the local sheriff if we could sleep in his jail cell. "Thanks for the offer."

She gave me an air kiss and walked away.

Mario came up next to me. "Wow. Not many people could have done what you just did."

“Eh. Not that big of a deal.”

A few sprinkles fell from the sky as Mario and I walked toward his car. A canopy of trees provided some cover as we made our way across a grassy area.

“I don’t want to burst your bubble, but she seemed a little too perky for me,” Mario said.

“Ditto. But my role in her life has hopefully come to an end.”

“Even if she’s about to cash in on a life insurance policy your dad set up?”

I gave him the eye. “Do you know something?”

“Nothing solid. Just a few rumors floating around town. Could be nothing.”

I thought about how my deceased husband had left us high and dry almost a year earlier. The last thing I was looking for, or expecting, was money from my dad. He had nothing, at least that was my impression. And if he had anything stashed away, it had to be blood money from his dealings with the drug cartel.

But then I thought about Erin, with college just a few years away. She had been taking school more seriously, talking about possible majors. And then Luke was right behind her. After that, graduate school could be a possibility. I wanted the absolute best for them, but I knew I couldn’t afford it. Not on my government paycheck.

“If Dad wanted me to have anything, he would have left it for me. The only way I’d entertain taking any money would be for the kids, their college education.”

We made it to his car, and he opened the door for me. Before I got in, I felt a buzz coming from my purse. I pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

“Your kids?”

“Uh...no,” I said, momentarily distracted.

“Don’t tell me. It’s your new boyfriend, Brad.” Mario winked.

I pulled my eyes from the phone and responded with my own wink. “It’s not Brad either. And he’s really not that new. I’ve known him for a few years. We just decided to make it formal here in the last couple of months.”

He snapped his fingers. “Your nanny, Ezzy, right?”

“All good guesses.” I glanced back at the phone. “Can you get me to the airport in Harlingen in one hour?”

Mario looped around his car. “You going to tell me what’s going on?”

“It’s Nick.”

“Your partner?”

I nodded. “He said they just got a lead on a guy who killed his wife and a neighbor.”

“So why is the FBI involved?”

“The neighbor was the Boston chief of police.”



Turning my sights to the sky, light flurries dropped out of the darkened abyss, fluttering past the stylish holiday lights in Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston's West End. Even on a Wednesday night with temperatures dropping below freezing and a dusting of snow on the ground, people were out in droves.

Nick and I were only after one person, although the prospect of finding Douglass Butterfield seemed as likely in this crowd as finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

"Can you let me take another look at his mug?" I asked Nick.

He held out his phone as his breath became foggy puffs in the air. The man's face appeared swollen, his nose both red and veiny. I'd seen that condition before on my dad. He was a drinker. And so was Butterfield.

"Are you okay? You seem a little anxious," I said as our shoes crunched across the stone surface.

"Some buddies of mine on the force said the whole department is on edge. One faction is really upset about the chief screwing around with another man's wife. Plus, he's married himself. Another group of cops are out for vengeance, and they're scouring the entire area looking for Butterfield."

"Anxious, pissed-off cops. Hmm. Could lead to itchy trigger fingers?"

"Hell yes. And if they catch this guy before we do, they might tear him apart one limb at a time."

"Some might say he deserves it, but a jury will make that decision. That is if we catch him before the men and women in blue do." I quickly dodged two couples who were walking and talking but not looking.

Nick nudged my arm and gestured with his chin to direct my attention in front of us. It was a police officer, and his head was on a swivel. Our sights went straight to his hand, which gripped his holstered pistol. As we sauntered past the officer, Nick dipped his head. "Good evening, officer."

The guy gave no indication that he'd even heard Nick. "Wow," I said as we continued past the officer.

"See?" Nick said. "My buddies were right."

"That, and the guy had a hell of an acne problem. Is he even old enough to vote?"

Nick offered a smirk as we wound through a crowd of folks watching a man singing and playing his guitar. He had a pleasant, soulful voice. Just a few feet past him, his voice was drowned out by the lively Christmas music filling up the marketplace, the beats of the holiday tunes perfectly in sync with the cascade of blinking lights. I saw a sign earlier boasting that more than three hundred thousand such lights were part of this choreographed scene. Luke would be in heaven if he were here.

Red and green Christmas decorations adorned nearly every lamp post and building façade, while white lights wrapped every tree trunk and the big Christmas tree at the far end of the open shopping area. The light snow added a more organic element of the festive season. And for once, I wasn't cursing the Boston winter—most likely because it was still in its early stages. On a normal night, I would have enjoyed strolling around the area with Brad, our arms interlocked.

But tonight was all about business. The business of catching a killer.

We approached one of the many restaurants, this one upscale and quite crowded. Nick was about to walk in, but I held out a hand.

“Okay, I know it's been a long day and all, but remind me why you think a killer is strolling around Faneuil Hall without a care in the world. Wouldn't he be two states away by now, if not trying to jump on a boat or plane to get the hell out of the country?”

“Sorry, Alex. I know you've been put through the ringer. Your dad and all...it's just sad. I'm really sorry to pull you in so soon after his death.”

“No worries, partner. I volunteered to come back early. This is the best medicine for me. Well, that and being close to my family.”

“Brad too?” Nick winked.

I refused to be ashamed of coming out of the relationship closet, even if half the population viewed me as a cougar—Brad was almost eleven years younger. I responded casually, but with confidence in my voice. “Of course. Brad's my man.”

“I'm sorry, it's just hard for me to get used to it.”

I patted his shoulder. “It's okay. It took me a while too. So, you think Butterfield is inside this fancy restaurant enjoying a 2005 Chateau Petrus?”

Nick's beady eyes bugged out. “When did Alex Troutt learn about great French wines? That's my area of specialty. Well, I share it with Antonio.”

“It's nothing. Just Brad and I doing a little experimenting.”

I glanced over at a couple making out under a faux mistletoe. “Wait, that didn't sound right did it?”

Nick guffawed through a closed fist.

“Funny, Nick. This perp...Butterfield?”

He nodded. “Right. We know a couple of things. Butterfield was silver-spooned ever since he could hold one. He loves the finer things in life...you know, like your four-thousand-dollar bottle of wine.”

“It's not mine. We just did the research.”

He held two hands in front of his chest. “Whatever. It's your life...well, yours and Brad's.”

His pokes were getting annoying. Withholding the urge to roll my eyes, I motioned for him to continue.

“While you were in Texas, I hunted down one of Butterfield's old college roommates.”

“Where did he go to school?”

“Right here. Boston College.”

“A good Catholic boy.”

“Hardly. He’s got quite the rap sheet. No time to review that now, but his old roommate said that Butterfield always claimed he had no recollection of anything he’d done during his drunken binges.”

I could feel a few of the flurries sticking to my hair, and I ran my fingers through the blond mop. “Sounds like something a college kid might say: ‘Uh, I couldn’t call you because I don’t remember ever meeting you.’”

“This guy is probably that type. He went to BC on a football scholarship.”

“Okay, let’s pretend he has no memory of the shooting. But he obviously knows people are looking for him.”

“Absolutely. After he found the chief of police in bed with his wife—”

“He actually caught them in the act?” For some reason, I could feel my gut tighten.

Nick gave me a single nod then continued to scope out the area, looking for Butterfield. I did the same, but the people might as well have been members of an ant colony. They all looked the same.

“The chief was apparently into some pretty risqué shit. All sorts of toys were found in the bed, along with the two dead bodies—both covered in blood, and naked.”

I extended a hand. “Stop right there. I’ve got enough sick visuals to give me nightmares for the next forty years. So, we’re at Faneuil Hall because…”

“Forgot to mention. I got lucky and found someone at his workplace to pick up the phone.”

“Which is?”

“Damn, you never stop asking questions.”

I splayed my arms. “And?”

“It was an administrative assistant who had worked with Butterfield off and on for the last couple of years.”

“Did he bang her?”

“Uh…wasn’t expecting that one. I don’t know. Didn’t ask.”

“What did you ask her then?”

“Not much. She just started spilling her guts. Said that poor Douglass had been a real joy to work with for most of his tenure at the firm.”

“The firm, like the one from the Tom Cruise movie?”

“Hardly. Some type of investment company. Pretty small, only fifty or sixty employees.”

“So Butterfield has one fan.”

“Kind of.”

“Shit, Nick, are we on a secret game show? This Q&A game is getting old.” I craned my neck, pretending to look for hidden cameras.

“I’m just answering your damn questions, Miss Testy. You wanted all the details on why we’re here.”

“Sorry. Keep going.”

He huffed out a breath, and the fog blew right into my face.

“Valerie was her name. Valerie said that Douglass had become very depressed the last couple of months. He finally told her a week ago that he thought his wife was having an affair, but when he confronted her about it, she denied it and said he was delusional.”

He paused. Maybe waiting for me to respond in some way? “I’m following you and this soap opera. What else did you find out?” I tried like hell not to think about Mark and the wench he’d hooked up with before his death. But that was exactly what I did.

“As they talked more, it dawned on her that whenever he got depressed or just needed somewhere to go, he would come to Faneuil Hall. He couldn’t stand being alone, but he didn’t really want to talk to anyone. He preferred just blending in with the crowd and people watching.”

“And drinking?”

“Do what?” Nick asked.

“Was his whole story nothing more than an excuse to drink?”

“Why would you say that?” Nick’s brow furrowed, which caused what little hair he had on his head to shift, as if he wore a toupee.

“That’s a classic move by alcoholics. They give you the pity party, and then casually put themselves into a place where they can blend in and drink like the rest of the public.”

“Kind of a bait-and-switch tactic.”

“Exactly.”

Both of our heads turned as a man broke through the crowd, screaming something about a fire. Just what we needed, more chaos.

“Sir...” I grabbed at his coat, while holding up my FBI credentials.

“Let me go, I’ve got to find help. My friend is being threatened.”

“What are you talking about?”

A thin beard outlined his bony jawline, but it was his unblinking, red-rimmed eyes that got my attention. And then I picked up a waft of something strong. He had been drinking.

“Sir, are you drunk?”

“What? I don’t have time for you.” He pushed me to the side. I grabbed his arm and spun him around.

“I don’t want to get physical, but you need to give me some solid answers.” I positioned my creds two inches from his face.

“You’re with the FBI?”

“Yes, I’m Special Agent—”

He grabbed my shoulders. “You’ve got to help. Quick, follow me.” He released his grip and ran back through the crowd.

“Crap,” Nick said as we both chased after him, running into one person after another. The snowflakes had doubled in size, but now took on a colorful glow as the light show continued above our heads.

“You see him?” I called out, shuffling between a horde of people.

“Nothing,” Nick said.

A moment later, I came into an opening. Nick popped out of the pack a few feet away from me. We both shrugged our shoulders.

“Was it just some drunk idiot?” Nick asked.

“Hey, FBI lady. Over here.”

I flipped around and found the man with the thin beard waving at us from the doorway of a bar. I jogged that way while catching the name on the awning: Nick’s Bar and Grill.

Couldn’t be, right?

Another flurry of mindless wanderers. “Excuse me.” I pushed through the crowd and got to the man.

“There are two bar rooms. Need to get to the one in back.”

As I followed him inside, everyone was either standing or walking toward the exit, their faces laced with stress.

“I don’t see anything,” I said.

“Through these double doors.”

We passed a waiter. “Are you the cops? Please help. She could be burned alive.”

Another shot of adrenaline pumped into my bloodstream, and I pushed through more folks on their way out, then followed the beard as it went through the double doors.

I stopped in my tracks. I saw a large man wearing a wrinkled suit pacing behind the bar, and my face went flush.

“That’s Butterfield,” I said under my breath.

“Shit. I think you’re right,” Nick said, fumbling for his phone. “Is he talking to himself or the girl?”

I turned my sights to the girl. She was soaking wet, as if she’d been dipped in a pool, her curly hair flattened by dampness. She had on a red blouse like the other waiters, but she also wore an apron over it. I figured she was a bartender.

“Can you please help Melissa?” the man with the beard whispered into my ear. Another bar employee came up to me. “Are you a cop?”

“FBI.” I kept my eyes on Butterfield. He didn’t seem to notice that anyone else was in the room. He was mumbling something over and over again as he paced back and forth. The girl, Melissa, stood with her hands by her side, her mascara snaking down her face.

“Cool. Whatever. This fucker just went bonkers. Jumped over the bar and put a gun to Melissa’s head because she wouldn’t serve him another shot.”

I craned my neck. “Where’s the gun? I don’t see it.” The bar blocked his hands from my view. “I’m not sure if he’s still holding it. He might have put it on a shelf under the counter. But we’re sure he still has his lighter.”

Just then Butterfield screamed, “Fuck that bitch! I don’t need her or anyone else. I just want some respect, dammit!” He held up his hand, his fingers clasping a silver lighter, his eyes glazed over.

The waiter slowly leaned over to me. "He poured four bottles of vodka on her. He threatened to burn her alive."

Nick's eyes met mine. "We can't pull out our guns. He could still light her on fire before we could drop him."

My mind instantly went back in time to when I'd dealt with my father when he was drunk and clearly not in a calm state of mind.

"I'll draw his attention and distract him, then you get into position to jump in between him and the girl," I said to Nick, already shifting to my right. We moved in slow motion, but my eyes never left Butterfield.

"Hey, can I get a drink?" I acted like I was unaware of the life-threatening situation. "Just had a long day at the office. I need a stiff one."

Butterfield swiped his opposite hand across his eyes. It didn't hold a gun.

"I'm no fucking bartender. She's the bartender," he said, slurring his words.

"Okay, can someone serve me a drink?" Standing between two vacant tables about fifteen feet from the bar, I held up my arms, still acting clueless.

Butterfield glanced around, but didn't appear to really notice the others in the room. Then, he grabbed a bottle off the glass shelf behind him and put it on the bar. "I'll have a drink with you." He found two shot glasses, filled one, then overfilled the second one, spilling whiskey on the bar. He slammed the bottle down. He was shit-faced, and his balance was off.

I walked over, picked up the drink, and held it up. I could now see behind the bar. His gun was next to the cash register, about eight feet to my left. The girl's eyes found me, and I could see her jaw quivering.

"Cheers," I said.

He hesitated a second, but followed my lead and downed the shot. Then he smacked the glass back on the bar and wiped his mouth clean.

"Doesn't get any better than that," he said, staring at the bottle as if it held magical powers.

"Hell no. Let's do another, whaddya say?"

I could see Nick prowling around the edge of the room, making his way toward the end of the bar. I still wasn't sure how we could get the lighter out of Butterfield's hand.

"Eh, what the hell. You only live once, right?" he said, followed by a sleazy chuckle. He poured the drinks, and we both imbibed. I could feel a trail of fire as the alcohol made its way down to my stomach. As he moved to set the glass down, I thought about grabbing his wrist, yanking it forward to make him lose his balance, and then hurling a straight jab at his nose. I wanted to stun him just long enough for me to climb over and knock the lighter from his hand.

But just as he set the glass down, he turned to Melissa. She was shivering all over, but hadn't moved an inch. He licked his lips and studied her.

I tried to get his attention back on me. "So, what's your name?"

He didn't respond, maintaining his gaze on her.

Another second and he might spot Nick pulling around the side. Between his lighter and the gun, we would all be dead in seconds. I quickly scanned the space around me, and my eyes fell on a small wooden chair. Keeping Butterfield in my peripheral vision, I lifted the chair high above my head and then used everything I had to smash it on the concrete floor. The noise split the silence and everyone jumped, including Butterfield.

“What the hell, lady?”

Now I had his attention. I had out-shocked the man who typically shocked everyone who came across his path.

“Can’t I get some fucking respect?” I yelled. I looked up and saw my hand still holding a broken leg from the chair, and my lips slowly curled into a smile.

Butterfield shook his head and let out a hearty chuckle. “Jesus, I thought I was a loose cannon. You’re fucking crazy.”

I just smiled. “I know. So can you give me a damn drink?”

“Just a minute. I’m not the bartender; she is.” I guessed he’d forgotten he’d already told me that. Not surprising. He pointed at Melissa, whose shaking seemed to increase with the mention of her name.

“Screw her,” I said. “She’s clearly not cut out for the job. You seem like you know what you’re doing. Don’t you own this place?”

Another hesitation, as if he were trying to figure what I was all about, where this could go.

“Well...not really. But that would be pretty cool. Maybe someday,” he said, gazing at the lights along the ceiling. “I need a cigarette.” He patted his coat pockets. “Want to join me?”

“What?” My pulse redlined in a single beat. “I hate smoke. Makes me sick to my stomach.”

He continued his search, looking inside his coat and his pants. “There they are.”

“My mom died of lung cancer,” I blurted out.

He was in the middle of plucking a cigarette from a mangled pack when he ceased motion. “Oh. I’m sorry. I...you’re right. I shouldn’t smoke.” He tossed the cigarettes to the floor and then ran his fingers through his hair. I could tell I’d taken away one of his crutches. Would the lack of fulfilling his nicotine fix only send him over the edge?

“Enough about me and my drama. I need a diversion. What’s your name?” I asked casually.

He released a breath, poured another drink into his shot glass, and examined the liquid as he swirled it. “Douglass. Some people call me Doug.” He shifted his eyes to me. “What’s your name?”

Nick’s head popped up above the bar on the far end. I only needed to distract Butterfield a little longer. “I’m Alex, although some people call me Queen B.”

“B?”

“For Bitch.” I laughed and he joined me.

Then his face went cold. “Are you married?”

“Nah. Been there, done that. It’s not my style.”

“Good. Keep it that way, if you want to maintain your sanity. I am...well, I guess I was married.”

I needed to get him to come around the bar. That would be ideal, the safest path to saving Melissa.

“I’m beat. Join me for a drink here at my table.” I motioned to the table that was covered with fragments of the broken chair. “It’s kind of a mess.”

He nodded once, staring at the table, considering it.

“You can bring the bottle with you. I think I’ve got a lot to share,” I said, sitting down in another chair.

He picked the bottle up by its neck while glancing over at Melissa. He stared at her for a moment, then turned back to me. He dropped his head to his chest. “I didn’t want to kill her. I loved her.”

Crap. He was getting into the details of the murder. That might send him over the top.

“Hey, Doug. Come on over here and join me. Let’s just chill and—”

“I killed my wife. And that prick, her fuck buddy.” Lifting his head, tears streamed down his face. The overt blue and red blood vessels made his nose look like it wasn’t part of his body, almost alien in fact.

I acted as if I didn’t hear anything about the murders, and I waved my arm. “Come on over, Doug. I’m thirsty, and man, I’ve got a story to tell you. My boss at work...you wouldn’t believe what he did.”

He puffed out a breath, lifting his hand with the lighter. It looked like one of those flip-top lighters. He set it down to pick up the two shot glasses and started heading around the bar. It was working. Just a few more steps...

“Damn, almost forgot my gun,” he said, spinning around.

I quickly turned to the left. Nick had one leg over the bar, and he froze. Shit!

“Hey, what are you...?” Butterfield started to ask, his eyes narrowing.

Suddenly, Butterfield leaped forward, but slipped on his first step. The bottle of vodka went flying, crashing to the floor, spraying shards of glass and alcohol everywhere. I shot out of my seat at the same time Nick scrambled to swing his body over the railing, Melissa at the epicenter of all the movement.

Two steps out of my chair, I screamed at Butterfield to get his attention, then immediately tripped over pieces of the broken chair. My hand touched the floor, which helped me keep my balance, and I pushed forward. Just as I looked up again, Butterfield righted himself and lunged for the bar.

The lighter!

He snatched it off the bar, fumbling with it for a second.

I heard Nick yell, “No!” at the exact moment I saw the deadly flame spark to life. My heart rammed my chest, and I took one more giant step and dove over the bar just as Butterfield’s arm came forward—he was throwing the



lighter at Melissa.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Nick hurling himself on top of Melissa as my shoulder connected with Butterfield's body, sending both of us into the glass shelves...a symphony of crackling glass all around us. Bottles, glasses of all sizes, and booze rained on top of us, a few right on top of my head. It seemed like the cascade of falling crap would never end. But as soon as my elbows felt a solid surface, I scrambled to find the lighter. Butterfield seemed dazed, rolling around on the ground. I quickly sifted through the glass, the smell of booze penetrating every pore. I kicked and pushed bottles and barstools. Butterfield started to groan. I reached for my gun, and all I felt was my leather shoulder holster. Crap! It must have dropped out when I fell. I could see Nick pulling Melissa toward the far end of the bar as glasses continued falling and crashing to the floor around me. Butterfield's moans grew louder and his movements more pronounced. He was trying to get his big body off the floor. My urgency doubled as I quickly rummaged through all the crap on the floor, searching for the lighter or my gun, hopefully both.

Then I remembered his gun by the register. Lifting from my knees, I craned my neck. There it was! I took two knee steps and instantly felt glass puncture my skin. I reached for the gun, but the drunk ogre grabbed my ponytail and yanked me back like a yo-yo. I fell into his burly chest and dropped off to the side, landing on more bottles and glass.

"You're just like my wife. A sneaky, lying piece of trash."

I looked up and saw a meaty fist flying at me...only six inches from my face. I jerked my body left, and his fist glanced off my shoulder, the power behind it feeling like I'd been hit with a sledgehammer. I quickly rolled twice, trying not to get stabbed by all the broken glass.

"You think you're quicker than me?" he belted out.

I looked up. He was midair, pouncing down toward me. He landed knee-first into my rib cage. It sucked every bit of wind out of me, and I had no chance to take in another breath. He grabbed my throat with both hands and started squeezing. Spit flew out of his lips as he shook me like a rag doll. I tried prying his fingers off, even digging what nails I had into his skin. His fingers wouldn't budge.

I thought I heard someone call my name. Was it Nick? Where was my partner? But oxygen had stopped reaching my brain, and I started to black out, the edges of my vision quickly closing in.

I had one chance to stay alive. Channeling my energy to my shoulders and arms, I waited for the right moment. Just as he lifted me off the ground by my neck, I smacked my hands against the side of his head, landing a perfect shot to his ears. He immediately unclenched my throat and grabbed his ears, falling backward.

"You bitch! You've ruined my hearing!"

I choked out a breath and then tried another. It felt like I'd swallowed a piece of coal. I turned over and pushed off my elbows, but heard more glass

breaking, someone stomping behind the bar. I forced myself to flip my head around.

It was Nick with his Glock aimed right at Butterfield, who was wallowing on the floor beneath him.

“Sorry, Alex. The bartender was losing it. She wouldn’t let me go.”

I tried to speak, but could only release a loud, wheezing, whisper, “I know the feeling.”

I couldn't help but let my eyelids close as Brad gently ran his fingers along the side of my neck.

"Don't stop," I said in a soft monotone. It was the most relaxed I'd felt since my run-in with Butterfield.

"I wish you'd gone to the hospital like the medics wanted," he said.

I took in a breath and held it for moment, allowing the scent of Brad to fill my senses. Anything to block out the gnarly stench of Butterfield and the nasty concoction of alcohol that had drenched me. We were in our quiet space, a section of unused cubes at the far end of our floor at the FBI's Boston office at One Center Plaza. While we never acted like love-struck rabbits, we had used this space a handful of times just to share a few moments of peace.

"I'm fine right where I am," I said, my eyes still closed.

"I already see bruising on your neck."

"I'm good."

"Alex..."

He paused, and I opened my eyes to see a caring, but concerned look.

"What is it?" My voice still had a raspy quality.

"Another few seconds, and he might have crushed your larynx. He might have killed you, Alex."

I put my hands on top of his. They were strong, yet soft, just like the man I had grown to care for in the last few months. And in the last couple of months, we'd finally taken that step to share our relationship status with anyone who cared to know.

"Nick was right there. He wasn't going to let anything happen to me."

He tried to smile, flashing his dimples for no more than a single eye blink.

"What is it?"

"I know your personality, Alex. You try to downplay anything that might put your life at risk," he said.

I tried to counter the point, but he gently put a finger to my lips. "I'm not trying to change you. Not sure it's possible anyway. But just be aware that you're not in this by yourself anymore. I'm right here with you, to support you. For us to be a couple, though, there has to be two of us."

I twisted my lips. "Not to worry. I realize I'm the lucky one. I've come too far not to realize that it's the journey that counts."

He looked over his shoulder, probably ensuring we weren't going to be interrupted, then leaned in and kissed the nape of my neck. "Just keeping it G-rated since we're at work and all," he said.

My body sizzled with electricity, and I quivered for a brief second before opening my eyes. "Who told you to stop?"

"Come on. We need to get back to the war room before people suspect

something.”

I tried tugging him back to me, my body fully prepared for the next phase of our encounter.

“Did you accidentally drink some of the booze at that bar?”

“It was all part of my master plan.” I gave him an overt wink while continuing to pull him toward me. “But to finish the plan, you need to pull down your pants and let me sit on your lap.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Oh how I wish.” He pulled me close to his chest and gave me a warm, soft kiss, holding it for an extra second. “After work we’ll finish this. Okay?”

“But I think I need to pick up Erin after a late tennis tournament.” I sounded like a whiner.

He took my hand and led me out of the cube space. “Maybe after the kids go to bed. We’ll figure out a way. We always do.”

He was right. As we walked the maze of hallways to make it back to the other side of the breezeway, I attempted to adjust my focus from Brad’s backside to what was left of today’s work.

On our way to the war room, we ran into Nick coming out of the breakroom. He raised an eyebrow, then winked at me. “Get over it, Nick.”

“What? I didn’t say anything.” He held up both hands, although one contained a tomato juice.

I pointed at the juice. “Still taking the healthy option?”

“Don’t you know it. I’m going all out to try to qualify for next year’s Boston Marathon. At this age, I can’t afford to take three months off. It’s a year-round effort for this old guy.”

He looked at Brad and then scrunched his lips together, as if he were about to make another age joke—the one that would inevitably point out that Brad was over ten years my junior. Been there, done that. It was time to move on. And if I could get there, surely Nick and the others could get there as well.

“So, you ready to interrogate our turkey?” Nick said, referring to our perp, Douglass Butterfield.

I ignored the bad pun. “I’ve been waiting for him to be processed,” I said, knowing that wasn’t completely true.

“Let’s give it our best. Not sure he’s going to share much, especially to you, since he thinks you betrayed him,” Nick said.

“Whatever.”

“Well, let’s get moving. Jerry said we’ve got an hour.”

Jerry Malloy was our supervisory special agent, better known as our SSA in FBI land. He headed up the Violent Crimes Squad. He wasn’t into playing politics, but he also knew when to pick his battles.

“Sounds like he’s getting pressure from someone above him,” I said as we opened a door and walked toward the interrogation rooms.

“The mayor personally called the Hoover Building in DC, wanting to know when justice would be served and Butterfield turned over to the Boston

police.”

“Can he guarantee he won’t be mauled or killed accidentally?” I asked.

“I love it when you defend the guilty,” Nick said.

We stopped for a moment in an adjacent room, the fingerprint machine in the far corner and a technician working on the machine that never seemed to work.

“I can’t imagine how he’s not guilty. But gutting him with a shank or beating him to a pulp before he ever goes to trial...that’s not very American. Due process, my man.”

Nick smirked just as Gretchen walked in. The talking ceased, and she eyed each one of us. She was one of our top staff operation specialists and often worked with Brad, our leading intelligence analyst. She used to have a thing for Brad...long before I really saw Brad for who he was. After a lengthy dry spell, she’d found her own younger man, a guy named Brandon who actually looked like a high school senior working at a drugstore.

“Everything good, Gretchen?” Nick asked.

“Oh, sure.”

It wasn’t convincing. “How’s Brandon?”

“Eh...” was all she could muster.

Just what I needed, Gretchen lusting after Brad again.

“What do you have?”

“Oh, this folder, right. I’ve got Butterfield’s criminal history, as well as everything else I could find out about him. Just to help you guys during your interrogation.”

I took the folder from her and gave it a quick glance. “This is good stuff. Thanks, Gretchen.”

“Can’t imagine how it’s going to change his fate,” Nick added. He slurped on his tomato juice. “You ready, partner?” He held up his fist, and I bumped it.

I gave Brad a quick wink as Nick and I turned down the hall and then nodded at the agent standing outside the room.

“He say anything yet?” Nick asked the agent.

“Every time I look inside, it looks like he’s sleeping.”

We peeked through the vertical glass and saw the same thing. Butterfield, whose wrists were cuffed around a steel pole off the side wall, was resting his head on the table. We opened the door and walked in, but he still didn’t budge.

I dropped the files on the table, creating a sharp, smacking sound. He grunted out a snore.

“Are we going to need a bucket of water?” Nick asked.

I walked around and kicked the leg of Butterfield’s chair. He quickly lifted up, looking around.

“Where am I? What’s going on?” He wiped his bloodshot eyes with the heel of his hand.

I glanced at Nick, wondering if we were going to be forced to play this game, the same one he'd apparently shared with his friend at work—that he essentially lost his memory every time he had too much to drink.

“Mr. Butterfield, you're in custody at the FBI office in downtown Boston. We have some questions to ask you.”

He wiped his eyes again. “I got a question for you first. I paid my taxes... at least I think I did.”

Nick sat in the chair across the table and made sure he had eye contact. “She said FBI, not IRS.”

“Oh, right. Why am I here again?” His voice pitched higher, and he really seemed to have no clue. “And what's the deal with the handcuffs?”

I leaned on the table, my face just a couple of feet from his.

“What? I had a few drinks, that's all. I'm not a bad guy. I just, you know, need a break every now and then.”

“A break.”

He gave me a strange look. He moved to the back of his chair, as if he were afraid of me.

“Come on, Mr. Butterfield, you can do better than that. Why don't you break down and cry and talk about how your mommy didn't feed you breakfast every morning.”

I could feel Nick's gaze, but I kept mine on the lying sack of shit in the room. Butterfield attempted to outstare me, but then he turned and looked at Nick. “What did I ever do to her?” He shrugged.

Before Nick could open his lips, I smacked the palm of my hand on the table, and Butterfield flinched. “Take a look.” I lifted my chin and pointed at my neck.

“I did that?”

I nodded. “And more. But I don't have to fill in the details, do I, Mr. Butterfield?”

His eyes fell from my gaze and eventually found the floor. A sadness seemed to sweep through his body.

“Mr. Butterfield?”

He waited and then finally looked up. “Can I get some water?”

Nick looked at me, and I gave him the nod. He stuck his neck outside the room and asked the other agent for a water. A few seconds later, he put the cup of water on the table. The perp didn't waste a moment before chugging it down.

“Go ahead and drink all you want. Then you're going to need to talk, Mr. Butterfield,” Nick said.

He released an audible “ah” when he finished. Water dripped off his chin, which sported a thin layer of gray stubble.

“Just call me Doug. I really hate my last name. Everyone always made fun of me.”

I could feel my jaw tighten. This big guy, a former college football player,

was actually complaining about being bullied. But it was a start, and he seemed like he was willing to talk. Anything to get a confession, at this point.

Leaning against the wall, I said, "How old were you?"

"When they made fun of me?"

I nodded.

"Oh, maybe five or six. I was a chubby little kid. So they called me Butterball, the fat-ass turkey."

"But I guess you got back at everyone once you started playing football."

"Little League was when it all started happening," he said, stretching his legs out.

"You dominated both sides of the ball?"

"Yeah, that, but I wasn't really talking about football."

"What were you talking about then?"

His eyes moved from the cup he was fidgeting with to me.

"I had my first drink when I was twelve." He swallowed once and tried to maintain his gaze, but it fell away. I wondered if he'd ever gone down this path. I opened the file again and noticed a litany of convictions for DUI, speeding, disorderly conduct, assault and battery. But no prison time.

"How did it taste?"

"It was a beer. Schlitz. I loved it." He paused, licking his lips. "That should have been a sign, I guess. But I was twelve. What did I know?"

"Did anyone else see you?"

He smirked. "My dad offered it to me, then sat down on the back porch and drank one with me."

Nick and I exchanged glances before Doug continued. "Yeah, I grew up in one of those families."

I wanted to jump ahead to the night he found his wife in bed with the police chief, but I didn't want to force it and then have him realize he should keep his mouth shut. He was telling us his life story. I just hoped he'd tell the truth once he got to the night he killed two people.

"Says here you have two older siblings, a sister and a brother?"

"Yeah. They were pretty cool, I guess. As I think about my time as a teenager...those weren't my best moments."

"Why's that?"

"Because I was a punk. Just running around, acting like I was Mr. Badass. My sister was in college, but she came home one weekend when my parents were out of town and threw a party. Wow...what a party it was."

"Yeah? You smoke a little weed, maybe something a little harder?"

"I did everything, times ten. I was over the top, challenging everyone, trying to shag all the college girls. I was full of myself." He smacked his lips. They were dry and cracking.

Nick jumped in. "Want some more water?"

"Uh, sure. Thanks."

As Nick left to get another water, I had a slight feeling of déjà vu—

talking to my dad the morning after one of his binges. I'd feed him multiple cups of coffee, and he'd talk to me in the calmest voice. He usually didn't go back and relive his moments of drunken glory, but even at age seven, right after Mom had died, I recognized how odd it felt taking care of someone twenty-five years older. Yet, given his personality and predisposition for how he handled stress and regret, it became the norm. I would prop him up, and then in return, he'd push me to be the best...usually in tennis, where I quickly learned how to put my foot on the throat of any opponent, especially if it was a boy. Yep, that was when Dad had the biggest smile on his face. I'd always wondered if that was the reason I'd worked so hard at the sport—just to see him happy.

"Here you go," Nick said, handing Butterfield another cup of water.

He downed it in seconds.

"So, Doug, while you were a first-team party animal, you obviously put some focus on other things as well, since you got into BC."

"Yeah, I suppose." He looked at the cup.

An abbreviated response. Maybe he was about to clam up, which meant it was time to bring in the lawyers.

"You suppose? I heard you were a badass on the football field."

He tried to smile, but his mouth never quite got there. "I did a few things, but it really just fed my ego and allowed me to be a bully. Want to know something else?"

Nick said, "Sure."

"I took PEDs. Just what a kid needed who had issues dealing with the highs and lows of life. It made me even more volatile. And how did I deal with that?"

"You drank even more," Nick said.

He fiddled with his cup while nodding. "And all the while, my parents, my family just thought I was a normal kid growing up."

"No one said anything or tried to get you help?" I asked.

"Pssh. They noticed once I got kicked off the BC football team during my sophomore year. That was the end of the world. I think they'd already planned on attending the NFL draft party with me a couple of years later."

Nick sat up. "You were NFL material?"

"That was the hype from the coaches when they recruited me out of high school. But they didn't know me. They didn't know that I didn't have it in here." He patted his chest.

I was amazed at how much he was pouring out his soul. It reminded me, once again, that in most crimes, there's more than one victim, even if the trigger event to initiate the downward spiral of the perpetrator started decades earlier. I glanced down at Butterfield's file. He was fifty-six. Society dealt with alcohol-related offenses differently in earlier generations. While society may be more aware nowadays, where did that leave Butterfield and many others like him...like Dad, who grew up in another time? Caught in a



quagmire of self-destruction, where the collateral damage to those of us nearby was often traumatic, if not catastrophic.

A thought just hit me: was my mother's hyper-intense focus on religion at least partially due to Dad's drinking problems? Or was her behavior the catalyst that sent Dad over the edge?

The chains from Butterfield's handcuffs rattled against metal, distracting my attention. He was wiping his face with both hands. Elbows on the table, he continued sharing his life, and all Nick and I had to do was listen. "Thought I had a plan after I dropped out of school."

"I don't see where you were actually kicked out of BC," I said, flipping pages in the file.

"Not formally. I had two semesters where I didn't show up to a single class, but because of my standing on the football team, the school just put me on probation. When I finally got kicked off the team, I knew it was just a matter of time, so I dropped out."

Nick glanced my way. We both knew we were getting close. I just hoped we could get Butterfield to finally reach the climactic ending of his tragic story before our time was up. I had a feeling this was a one-shot deal. Once the Boston Police Department took custody and started playing hardball, Butterfield would probably wise up and demand a lawyer. After umpteenth motions and proceedings, the judge would finally set a trial date—a trial that would drag reputations through the mud and take months to complete. No one would be satisfied with the outcome or the process through which it was reached. No one except the lawyers collecting their fees.

"Your plan?" Nick asked. "You said you had a plan after you dropped out."

"Right. The big plan. Well, that consisted of throwing all my crap in the back of my hunting truck and driving down to Virginia. I was going to go into the real estate business with my cousin."

"What part of the state?" I asked.

"The beach, actually Norfolk."

My old stomping ground...when I was barely able to walk. For some reason, I thought about the time when Mom died. It was crazy, yet I couldn't recall her funeral. I only knew that my life had changed almost instantly, including my address. Dad moved us to Port Isabel, Texas, in no time, and we started over. And it didn't take long for me to lose almost any recollection of my mom. Another sad thought. But at the same time, I didn't completely lose my connection with her. Dad had told me that I'd decided to go into law because of the fact they'd never found the guy who killed my mom by running her car off the road.

I blew out a breath, wishing we could start winding down the interview. I didn't need to relive decades-old drama. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't a natural disposition, and I wasn't going to start now.

"That's where Agent Troutt grew up," Nick said, extending a hand to me.

I gave him the eye. I know he was only trying to keep the talking machine moving, but still...

I just nodded and glanced at my phone, wishing it would all end in about five minutes.

"Oh yeah? It was a pretty nice area, I guess. Lots of government work with the Navy base in Virginia Beach," Butterfield said. "My cousin had served in the Navy. He thought there would be plenty of opportunities to sell homes, and then we could move into commercial real estate and really bank."

"Did you?" Nick asked.

"Did I what?"

"Bank."

"I got my real estate license, which itself was a miracle. I can still remember the hangover I had when I took the test."

I could imagine this guy's top ten list of hangovers would put anyone to shame.

Again, he kept talking, as if he was being paid to tell us his life story. "Me and Terrance, though...we weren't a good mix."

Butterfield reexamined every inch of his paper cup, picking at the frayed edges.

"Did you guys fight a lot about how to run your mini empire?" I asked.

He lifted his eyes. "Actually, we were exactly the same, but he was just more experienced than me."

I turned my head, not understanding what he was saying.

"He partied. Hard. Like there was no tomorrow."

"Shit," Nick said.

"I know, right? Worst choice I ever made," he said, his voice suddenly void of energy. For at least a minute, he just stared off into the corner, not moving. He was recalling something or someone. According to his file, he didn't meet his wife until he was thirty years old. Was he thinking about her now, how he'd found her and the police chief together? "Doug, what happened?" Nick asked.

"What didn't?" He shook his head and took in a deep breath. "Oh my. What have I done with my life?"

His whole body seemed to cave in. This mountain of a man appeared to be losing the depression battle. But it was too soon.

"Who here hasn't screwed up their life in some fashion?" I said. "You see, Doug, we're not raising our hands."

He glanced at both of us and then nodded a couple of times.

"You're doing good. Tell us more."

It took a minute, but he finally pulled himself from the back of the chair, leaned on the table, and anchored his chin on his hands. "I was arrested for DWI twice in six months."

I nodded.

"But I kept partying, kept thinking I didn't have a drinking problem. I was

twenty-two, carefree and thinking I could rule the world.”

“Just like most young people.”

“But very few were as destructive as me.”

He was right. I had to get to the next phase of his life, or at least find out if he would even go there.

“So something changed your life. Did you meet your future wife?”

It appeared he held his breath for a moment, his eyes unblinking. Then he said, “Oh, Rebecca. I met her in Vegas three or four years later. We were both drunk then.”

Nick and I traded another glance. Neither of us said a word, hoping Butterfield would use that as a segue to get to the night of the murders. “But the time I really thought my life had changed was when I was arrested for a hit-and-run.”

Something inside me clicked, and I could feel my pulse pick up speed. Why, I had no idea. “How bad was it?”

“Fortunately for me, it looked worse than it was. A guy on a motorcycle ran a red light, and I plowed right into him. Of course, I was higher than a kite —”

“Weed on top of the alcohol?” I asked.

“Weed, PEDs, coke...and yes, my booze of choice. I didn’t discriminate against any of them.”

“You didn’t stick around to help the guy from the motorcycle?”

“Of course not. He had a broken leg and some scrapes, but I didn’t know that. I thought he was dead. I was all about saving myself.”

“I guess it didn’t work out.”

He shook his head. “They caught me about an hour later. Want to know where I was?”

I opened my hands to the ceiling.

“A bar. A fucking bar. Damn, I had...” His voice faded for a moment. “Check that. I was going to say I had a pair on me, but the reality was I had balls the size of tiny atoms. I was gutless and afraid.”

“You may not realize it yet, Doug, but you admitting this now is a good thing. It’s never too late to put everything on the table and figure out what’s important in life,” Nick said.

My partner knew what he was doing. By giving Butterfield a pat on the back, he would keep him talking.

“Thanks,” Butterfield said, looking at Nick. “But I don’t deserve it. Not a bit of it.”

This might be the moment. I could see he was on the edge of confessing his life’s biggest regret—the one that would send him to jail for the rest of his life. He could save the victims’ families and the city a lot of undue pain by just admitting his crime and moving on to the next phase of his life.

He brought his hands to his face, almost as if he were praying. The chains rattled again, breaking the silence in the room.

“Doug, we know you’ve made mistakes, but we’re all human here. We’re not judging you,” I said.

“I lied a moment ago.”

I had no idea where he was going, but I could feel my neck grow stiff. “How so?”

“That turning point in my life didn’t come when I hit that guy on the motorcycle.”

I looked at Nick and then pushed away from the wall I was leaning against and scanned his file one more time. “Doug, it’s actually documented right here about your hit-and-run. You were twenty-two, right?”

He nodded, but he didn’t look at me.

“Am I missing something?”

A few beats, and then he brought his fingers to his eyes and started breathing like a Lamaze champ. “Doug, we’ve told you before, we’re not here to judge you.”

“I know,” he said through a garbled voice. He cleared his throat and continued. “I haven’t told anyone this...this part of my life.”

He closed his eyes and let his chin drop to his chest. We were losing him. Could we get another couple of statements from him?

“Do you know the statute of limitations for...” He stopped talking before he finished, his tired eyes glazed over.

Was there something from his past he wasn’t telling us?

“We’re here for you,” Nick said. “You want some more water? Maybe a snack or candy bar?”

“No!” he erupted.

Nick flinched.

“I’m tired of being saved. Tired of thinking I can scam everyone into doing what I want them to do. Tired of getting away with shit. And believe me, I’m one of the greatest bullshit artists out there.”

He released a chuckle, although he didn’t smile. A few more deep breaths, and then he wiped sweat from his forehead.

“I’m not sure I can do this.” He was breathing so hard I thought he was heading for a heart attack.

“You can do it, Doug. You’re stronger than you think,” Nick said.

Doug pounded a fist to the table, and then another. Then he squeezed his eyes shut, but that couldn’t stop the flow of tears. His face turned red, and he absolutely lost it.

I could see the agent on the other side of the glass look in. I held up a hand, signaling we were okay for now. I looked back at Butterfield as he wept and banged his fists on the table. It was painful to watch on so many levels. But I knew this breakdown had to happen—for him to have any chance at moving on with some semblance of life, even if it would be behind bars, and for us to get an admission of guilt.

Finally, he ran out of gas and rested his head on his arm, which was

draped across the table. A minute passed and he said nothing.

Nick tried to bring him back to life. "After all these years of lying to yourself, don't you want to just put everything out there? To finally take that huge weight of guilt and shame off your shoulders?"

Butterfield lifted his head and nodded.

"We're ready when you are," Nick said, crossing his legs.

"It was a month after I hit the motorcycle guy," he said, wiping tears from his face with the grace of a bear. "I was out on bond. My parents had put up fifty grand, and I gave them my word I wouldn't run, that I'd be a good, law-abiding citizen until my trial or the family lawyer was able to work out some type of plea deal."

I stuffed my hand in my pocket, looking for something to keep me anchored. He was at rock bottom, and he was going to let it all out. I was anxious, but transfixed by every motion he made, every word that came out of his mouth.

Glassy-eyed, he stared at the blank wall, and I wondered if he was replaying whatever event took place so many years ago that still haunted him.

Nick gave him a slight nudge. "So where were you?"

"Driving in my hunting truck. I'd actually put in a day's work at our little real estate office. I was trying to stay busy. Anything to keep the demons out of my head."

"And?"

"I met a couple of buddies for happy hour. Nothing serious, just a couple of drinks to take the edge off. It was all about being social—at least that's what I had convinced myself."

Another pause as he dug his fingernails into the palm of his opposite hand. This guy was falling apart before our eyes, and it was nerve-racking to witness. But I couldn't stop watching or listening.

"I got in a fight over a stupid pool game, and I got kicked out of the bar. Of course I blamed everyone else, put up a big scene. I was pissed. So how did I handle it? Like a little brat. I went to a liquor store, picked up a bottle of cheap whiskey, and jumped back into my truck. I drove like a bat out of hell, screaming at the top of my lungs while downing the entire bottle of whiskey. That taste...it's just so addictive. It brings out the worst in me."

"How did it end, Doug?" Nick said calmly.

"It was late, maybe eleven or so at night. Not many folks on the road. I was on some two-lane highway in the middle of nowhere. That fucking deer." He pressed his fists into the sides of his head. "No...I can't. I can't do it!"

"Doug, I think you—"

"No," he barked. "I'm saying I can't blame it on an animal. It's just me justifying my actions again. Finding another excuse. I won't do it. The deer caused me to swerve, but I shouldn't have been doing eighty miles per hour, not on a night with a lot of fog, and not when I was drunk as hell. I lost control of my truck, swerved all over the road. The next thing I knew I was

headed for the railing of a bridge. I swung the truck back and thought I was safe, but I rammed right into a car parked on the side of the road.”

I took a step in his direction, my gut twisting. “Where was this, Doug?”

He thought a moment. “Highway 165, south of town a bit.” He looked at me a second, then went back to the blank wall. “I jumped out of my truck and ran over to the car. It was just dangling off the side, swaying up and down, with this creepy sound of metal grinding. I saw a woman inside. She looked dazed, but alive. I panicked.”

“Did you leave the scene, Doug?” I asked. I could feel the reverberation of my heart all the way up my neck.

“Not right away. I tried opening the back door. I finally got it open, but before I could jump in and reach for her over the seat, the car began to fall. I jumped back, and the car went over the edge. I heard it hit the water below.”

“Oh God,” I said, wondering if there was any way possible that this man, Douglass Butterfield, could have...

I stopped myself before I finished the thought.

Nick jumped out of his chair. “Alex, are you okay?”

Oxygen was flooding my brain. I felt like I was hyperventilating.

“What the hell is going on with her?” I heard Butterfield ask.

I took a couple of steps, but lost my balance and put a hand on the table.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” Nick held me up.

“Get me out of here. Quick.”

A soft glow from the oversized computer monitor illuminated the darkened space within Gretchen's double cube. Her fingers raced across the keyboard, only interrupted by a few quick clicks of the mouse. I tried to look over her shoulder, as Brad rested his hand on my back.

"Gretchen will find it. No worries," he said.

*It was the record of Mom's wreck thirty-two years earlier. If Douglass Butterfield was telling the truth, then the state of Virginia would have a record of the crash, and we could verify the location and timing.*

I used both hands to wipe my face, knowing I was smearing my mascara, and not caring in the least. "I'm not sure why I lost it back in the interrogation room. It just..." I couldn't verbalize the feelings that were flooding my mind.

"It came out of nowhere. Who wouldn't have reacted like that?" Brad said. "I'm so sorry, babe."

I could see Gretchen's eyes quickly shift in our direction, then back to the screen. I wondered if she'd have taken exception to Brad's term of affection for me: babe. While it came naturally to him, and to me, I realized that she of all people probably wasn't thrilled to see the man of her dreams with another woman, especially me. I could have asked about her and Brandon, hoping to swing any ill will over to a more positive thought, but at this juncture, I didn't really care. I was concentrating on one thing.

"I just have to know. You understand that, right?" I pulled my eyes off the computer screen and looked up at Brad, who offered an affirmative nod.

"Of course. Just realize you're not in this alone. No matter what you find out, I'm here to support you. We can get through this together."

I placed my hand along the side of his face. I was drawn to kiss him, to feel his arms around me, to feel the pressure of his hard body against me. But not now. Later.

"Getting any closer, Gretchen?" I asked, turning my attention back to the monitor as pages came to life as fast as I was blinking.

"Working my way through their countless login and verification screens. Just a bunch of bureaucratic security for us Feds to go through," she said, a hint of frustration in her voice.

A series of heavy footsteps, then Nick appeared from around the corner of the cube. "BPD detectives are on their way to pick up Butterfield."

I could feel my gut twist again. "I don't want to let him go until we know for certain."

"Can't Jerry delay them until tomorrow? Hell, it's after midnight," Brad said.

"I asked. Said he tried calling in a favor, but they won't have any of it. They want this guy on a skewer for killing the police chief."

No one said a word for a moment—not a sound, except for Gretchen’s nails clicking and clacking. Nick finally broke the silence. “Do we know if the report will even be available online? It might be sitting in a cardboard box in a warehouse with ten thousand other boxes.”

“I can answer that,” Gretchen said, not slowing down a bit. “Many of the states in recent years have invested resources to digitize many of the backdated records. Virginia is one of them. That’s not to say the occasional physical hard copy wasn’t lost or destroyed accidentally and, therefore, may not show up in any online search.”

I raked my fingers through my hair, not sure if I could deal with a response of “record could not be found.” Then I’d be left wondering if the physical report was truly lost in the transition to the digital file, or if Butterfield was telling the truth. And if he was telling the truth, was my mother actually involved in the same wreck?

“Bingo,” Gretchen said, sitting higher in her chair.

My pulse clocked faster as the three of us leaned over her shoulder. She tapped her finger to the monitor. “The report is dated November 11, almost exactly thirty-two years ago.” She peered back at me, then continued to scan the report. “It says this highway patrol officer found a damaged guardrail and car fragments at Highway 165 at the North River Bridge. They found the car, an Oldsmobile Cutlass, in the stream below.”

I wracked my brain trying to recall if Dad ever told me what type of car Mom had been driving when she died. I only remembered it was brown and had two big doors.

“Down here,” Gretchen said, pointing lower on the screen, “it states that the car belonged to a Charlotte Troutt. And she was in critical condition when she was airlifted to Norfolk Community Hospital.”

A wave of emotion snuck up on me. I’d just assumed Mom had died at the site of the crash, not en route to the hospital or shortly thereafter.

“You okay?” Brad asked.

“Yeah, just trying to process everything.” *Trying* was the operative word. I couldn’t really get my mind to clear enough to let it all sink in. What did all of this mean? Why had I felt like I’d been sucker-punched in both kidneys?

Gretchen didn’t stop there. “If I click here...” She paused and did just that. A screen full of photos popped up. One included a close-up of the car attached to a steel cable being pulled from the river. Three pictures of the bridge, the car parts, and the destroyed guard railing. Gretchen clicked through a number of other pictures, all from different angles. The lighting wasn’t great, but nothing else stood out.

“Wait,” I said as she clicked again.

“Dammit, Gretchen,” Brad said, wiping a hand across his face.

He was upset because of the content of the picture: an interior shot of the front seat of the car, where something dark was smeared on the steering wheel and tan vinyl seating area. It was blood.



“Oh, sorry,” Gretchen said, quickly clicking back to the report.

I turned around and anchored my arms on the back of an empty desk chair. I heard some mumbling behind me, but I paid no attention. I closed my eyes for a second and tried to think about my mom when I was a kid. No warm hugs or anything affectionate. No life lessons I could think of, or bonding moments. We coexisted, and I did my best to not draw her ire. Later on, I’d have a similar routine with Dad, the drunk. But it was different with him. He also had a soft side. A human side, where I could feel that he loved me, even if he wasn’t willing to change a lot in his life. Mom, not really. Not from my vantage point.

Brad’s hand touched my back. “Want me to take you home, and we can just chill on your couch for a while, help you wind down?”

I filled my lungs with air, and with that came a surge of resentment tickling the back of my throat. “Not yet. I want ten more minutes with Butterfield.”

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“I lost my chance.” I stood in Jerry’s office, Brad and Nick alongside me, as we watched through the glass front wall as the police/Butterfield procession exited a door on the other side of the breezeway. By the time I had made my way back to the interrogation room, the first wave of BPD officers had shown up and claimed their suspect.

“I know you wanted some closure, Alex,” Brad said. “Maybe the BPD will allow you to conduct a follow-up interview once they have their turn.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Nice try. But we both know that once the Suffolk DA—and I don’t mean one of the many assistant DAs, but the main guy—gets his hands on him, it will take a Supreme Court injunction for anyone to get near Butterfield.”

The man in question became visible, and it wasn’t pretty.

“Either the most notorious serial killer in the modern era or the world’s most wanted terrorist,” Nick said. “That’s how the Boston Police Department is handling Butterfield. It’s so over the top.”

With a team of four detectives leading the way, Butterfield was being walked down the hall toward the elevators with chains attached to almost every appendage. His steps were tiny. Every third or fourth one, he’d stumble from the lack of free movement, but the officer holding the chain that was attached to the dog collar, would simply yank on it, and he would manage to quickly find his balance.

I counted twelve uniforms surrounding Butterfield, all of who were built like Greek Gods. They had sent over their strongest, most athletic officers.

“Are they thinking Butterfield is going to magically multiply into ten different guys who are all trained ninjas?” Brad exclaimed. “I know he did some bad things, but I don’t understand what they expect to get out of this show of force. Intimidation? You guys said Butterfield is this close to

completely crumbling,” he said, holding his thumb and forefinger inches apart.

I blew out a breath. “With Dad gone, I know my chance of learning anything more about how Mom died is walking out the door.”

“What else could you want to know, Alex?” Nick said bluntly.

“Thanks, partner.” I deadpanned. Nick shrugged. “Not to be mean, but shit, it sounded like he told you everything he knew.”

Crossing my arms, I pinched the bridge of my nose, then we watched Butterfield enter the elevator, which quickly filled up with detectives and cops. In fact, four were left without a ride, so they punched a button and waited for the next elevator as the doors shut on the first one.

“Alex, you’re like a sister to me, dammit,” Nick said. “It makes me sick that all of this shit is being shoved down your throat thirty years after the fact. But, you know, maybe it’s good that you finally know the truth. Maybe it was fate that we were put on this case, caught Butterfield, and then had that discussion with him.”

I nodded. “You’re right, Nick.”

Keeping his public display of affection to a minimum in the wide open, Brad brushed his fingers along my thigh.

“By the way, you were fricking masterful in that interrogation room,” Nick said. “To pull that guy out of the depths of hell and get him to open up about his life...I’m serious about this: they should create a course at Quantico about what you accomplished.”

I smiled at Nick and then patted him on the side of his arm. “Flattery will get you nowhere. But thanks. And you were part of it as well.”

With my senses finally returning to normal, I picked up a waft of something sour or moldy. I think Brad must have seen the look on my face.

“We need to get you home and into the shower,” Brad said, showing his teeth.

A trench formed between Nick’s beady eyes. “Oh geez, guys, can you cut me a break? I can’t deal with your romantic interludes.”

I looked at Brad, but made sure Nick could hear me. “I’ll only take a shower if two conditions are met.”

“What are those?” Brad tried not to laugh.

“You take it with me.”

“That’s easy. And the other?”

“You have to give me a spanking while we’re in there.”

Nick shook his head repeatedly, rapidly. “You just warped my brain. Can you stop already?”

I hooked my arm inside Brad’s and said, “Now I’m ready to go home.”

I realized Brad and I had a second career option—stealth, undercover agents. After entering the house with minimal noise, I made a quick appearance at Ezzy’s bedroom door, since I knew she would be the most curious and courageous if she heard anything in the house. Brad stayed out of sight in the kitchen. I didn’t want to get into the story behind the story with Ezzy—that I’d just learned how my mom had been killed and by whom. I would talk to her about it tomorrow. For now, I just wanted to remove the layer of grime off me, and then make love to the man of my dreams.

I needed both in the worst way.

Halfway through the dark living room, Brad stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered with one eye on the stairs, hoping the kids would remain fast asleep.

He pointed down to the hardwood. I saw Pumpkin, our fat cat, sprawled out on the floor right in front of Brad. Pumpkin stretched, then released a very unmanly meow.

“Dammit,” I hissed.

“It’s okay. I can get around him, but I thought he might follow us and then start clawing at the bedroom door. And that might wake up the kids, and...you know.”

While Brad and I had unabashedly shared our relationship status with the world, we couldn’t openly sleep together in the house when the kids were home. This was a rare exception, given the dramatic events of the evening. And since I didn’t think it was appropriate to go out and tie one on, we jointly decided to take the risk.

I nodded. “His head might be a tenth of the size of his Jabba-like body, but I swear, he can be devious. I know just the thing that will shut him up. Stay here.”

“I’m not moving an inch,” he said.

I slipped off my shoes to remain extra stealthy, walked into the kitchen, and opened up the pantry door. I scooped out a quarter cup of dry food and then gingerly emptied the food into Pumpkin’s bowl in the mudroom.

The cat appeared, almost magically.

“There. You happy?” I whispered as if he would reply. Of course, he just plowed into the food as if I didn’t exist. I joined back up with Brad.

“Are you sure the cat won’t be scratching at your door after he’s done feeding his face?”

“In ten minutes, he’ll be curled up on that ottoman purring like he’s being romanced by the girl cat of his dreams.”

“Sounds like fun.” A shaft of light shining through the front curtains caught just enough of Brad’s face to see his sexy smile.

“Follow me?”

“As if I’d pick another option,” he said with a wink.

When we got to the staircase, we timed our steps in unison so that anyone listening would hear the typical creaks from one person. We got to the top, and I checked under the kids’ doors to ensure their lights were off. Two thumbs-up to Brad, and we padded to the end of the hallway, walked into my room, and locked the door behind us.

The layer of filth came off in no time, but we stayed in the shower for at least an hour. When we finally collapsed on the bed, both of us out of breath, I said, “That was the hottest shower I’ve ever taken.” I rested my hand on his abs, which made a washboard seem doughy. “Thanks for being there for me today,” I added, staring up at the ceiling without a stitch of clothing on me.

He rubbed the side of his hand against my hip. “No reason to thank me, Alex. I told you, we’re a team.”

“Well, I’m sure you didn’t start dating me to deal with all this drama.”

“I’m not thirteen. What’s that saying? Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans. Just got to roll with it and keep everything in perspective, I guess.”

He warmed my heart like no other man I’d ever been with. I wanted to reply with the ultimate verbal connection—the L word. But something stopped me. It could have been the fact that I watched my dad be buried and then found out who killed my mom all in one lousy day. I should cut myself a break. But eventually, I would need to buck up and act like a grown woman.

A few seconds later, he rolled on top of me and gave me a kiss that would have sent any other woman to the moon. But I’d just returned from deep space, so I wasn’t that surprised.

“You ready for round two?” he asked with a sparkle in his eye.

I could feel he wasn’t just boasting, so I offered my own challenge. As I clutched my fingers into his sides, I said, “The question is, are you ready?”

We both crossed the finished line at the exact same moment.

And then he snuck out just before the sun rose.

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The crackle of the living room fire drew my eyes off my paperback for a moment. I sipped the last of the hot chocolate, then leaned forward and set my empty mug on the coffee table. Pumpkin voiced his displeasure with the fact I had moved, unsettling his curled-up position at my feet.

“Go back to sleep, fat boy.”

He yawned and did as I said, but not because I said it. Jerry had sent me a text overnight, essentially ordering me to take a day off. When I saw the note this morning, I didn’t fight it. For once, we had a lull on the investigation front. Just after I watched the kids head off to school, I sent a text to my rock-solid better half, Brad, letting him know I was staying at home for the day, to which he replied: *Enjoy. U finally get to see how the 90 percent live. xo*

I read another page of my book, an interesting biography on the life of Maya Angelou. But not interesting enough to take my mind off the last few days.

After a life filled with jumping on and off the alcohol wagon, Dad had finally left this earth. And last night, as Butterfield released his demons, it seemed like Mom had died all over again. I stared into the flames and thought about my parents and the loss that still resonated. What was I mourning exactly? They both were pretty flawed people. Dad and I had a roller-coaster relationship at best, and Mom had been loitering in her own universe as far back as my memories went.

Why couldn't we have just been a normal family? Why couldn't we have just loved each other? I wasn't naïve. I knew members of a family quibbled and disagreed some, but in the long run, didn't they feel a bond that couldn't be broken?

I stroked Pumpkin's back, and he released another fanged yawn. "Family," I said out loud, my eyes looking through the sheer curtains on the front windows. That was what I was mourning—actually craving as long as I could recall—a sense of family. *True* family, not just living under the same roof and sharing a few meals together, even when no one says a word.

I knew I felt a tremendous bond with Luke and Erin, and even Ezzy in a slightly different way. But I personally didn't have that familial anchor that most people got as they grew up. I had to seek it from others on my own. And then there was Mark. Maybe it was one of the subconscious things that had attracted me to him, in addition to his Italian charm. He had a family with well-established roles. And even though I found their opinions and traditions meddlesome and overbearing, I put up with it. All because I didn't feel the comfort and support from my own family.

I blew out a breath and turned back to the fire. A log split in two and fell between the slats of the grate. Staying at home, chilling out on the couch was indeed the right kind of therapy for me. But I still felt a hole in my gut. And I wasn't sure that staying at home for the next month would truly heal the wound deep inside.

I had to take action, do something that would finally patch that hole and allow me to put this crap in my rearview mirror. I recalled Dad's funeral. It was somber, but at the same time sobering—my interaction with Carly notwithstanding. Douglass Butterfield recklessly and selfishly killed my mother. Alcohol had ruined his life and that of many others who had crossed his path. And then he'd killed his wife and her lover.

Hearing Butterfield describe his state of mind and all the details around the crash that killed my mom was surreal. It felt like it was part of my life, but at the same time, it seemed like a story about someone else. A thought pinged my mind: I should finally visit my mother's gravesite. To put the final chapter on her life, or maybe her role in my life, I knew I needed to make the effort to spend a few minutes saying something...whatever would come to my mind.

But I had to do it there, at her grave.

With a renewed sense of energy, I lifted from the couch—Pumpkin meowed in protest behind me—and walked into the kitchen. Just as I slid onto the barstool and opened my laptop, Ezzy walked through the back door with a single bag of groceries.

“Morning, Dr. Alex,” she said cheerfully.

My Guatemalan nanny, who had grown into a dear friend, was generally positive but also quite blunt. I needed both in my life.

*“Hola. ¿Cómo estás?”*

“Your accent needs work, Alex. Lots of work,” she said, sliding a gallon of milk into the refrigerator. “I’m good. Had a nice long night of sleep. And how about you?”

I lifted my eyes just above the screen, but I wasn’t sure what to say, so I said nothing.

Ezzy placed pears in a bowl on the counter and then tossed the plastic bag in the recyclables pouch inside the pantry door. She finally turned back to me, a hand on her hip.

“Well, are you going to make me ask you?”

“Ask me what?” I knew I sounded like my twelve-year-old son.

She flipped a few gray locks of hair out of her eyes and walked to our little coffee station, where she began to empty out the bag of ground coffee she had brought home.

“Did you get the cinnamon dolce flavor again? I love that,” I said, glancing at the screen long enough to open a quick instant-message session with Gretchen at the office.

“Nice try, Alex.”

“What?”

She pointed a finger at the ceiling.

“Did someone plant a bug in the house?” I couldn’t help but smile.

“Your room is just over my room,” she said with no facial expression. “I heard things last night. You either move in that squeaky bed at a very rhythmic pace, or...”

I held up a hand. “I get it.”

Grinning from ear to ear, she walked toward me, placed a hand on my shoulder, and then leaned in and kissed my cheek. “I’m so happy for you, Alex. Brad is a special guy. And that has nothing to do with what happened in your bedroom last night.”

While I didn’t need her approval, Ezzy was the closest thing I had to a mom. And her acknowledgement of my happiness was...awesome.

She then noticed my computer was open and I’d started an IM with Gretchen. “I thought you were taking the day off?”

“I was...actually, I am.” After asking Gretchen to give me a minute, I told her about Butterfield sharing his life story and the realization that he was the one who had killed my mom.

Anchoring her arm off the back of my stool, Ezzy put a hand to her heart and closed her eyes momentarily.

“Ezzy, are you feeling okay?” She had a heart issue, and while daily medication was supposed to keep her issues in check, there were no guarantees.

“I’m fine, Alex. Heartbroken for you, upset that you had to learn about your mother this way.”

I rested my hand on hers. “I’m good. Well, I think I will be. I’m finally going to take the next step forward and visit my mother’s gravesite. I think that will give me some perspective about my childhood. I probably need to just forgive Mom and let my past be just that.”

I could feel a tear bubble at the corner of my eye.

Ezzy put her arms around my shoulders and hugged me tight. “You’re a hell of a woman. A great example for your kids, your family.”

The tear bubbles suddenly multiplied, and I reached for a napkin and dabbed my eyes.

She wiped away a tear of her own, then said, “So, back to my original question. Why are you working?”

“I’m not really working. Gretchen has all the contacts and passwords to the records for the state of Virginia.”

I flipped around and typed a note to Gretchen, asking if she could send me the URLs and passwords to the state of Virginia records management websites and databases.

*Sure. One sec,* she said in a note back to me.

Ezzy walked back into the kitchen. “I’m in the mood for guava juice. How about you?”

“I’m game,” I said, as the data from Gretchen started to arrive in my IM box. I quickly started accessing the first website.

Ezzy poured two drinks and brought mine over. “Thanks.” I took a fortifying sip and set the glass on the counter as Ezzy slipped into the seat next to me.

“Mind if I ride shotgun?”

While keeping my gaze on the screen, I released a wry smile. “You sound like one of the kids.”

“They take twenty years off my age, what can I say?”

“I just remember your predecessor. She nearly took twenty years off my life.”

“Well, let’s not dredge up bad memories...even if she was a little tramp.” Ezzy giggled like a teenage girl, and I found it infectious.

“What information are you looking for here?” Ezzy asked, leaning in closer.

I clicked three times, then inserted one of the passwords Gretchen had forwarded. I clicked submit, but an error popped up. “She must have sent me the wrong password.”

“Actually, I think you put in a capital I on the first key, but I think it’s a small L.”

I tried again, using Ezzy’s suggestion, and clicked submit.

A pop-up opened that said, *Verifying your credentials. Please do not leave this screen.*

I took another sip of my guava juice and then wiped my mouth. “This site allows me to access death certificates.”

Ezzy nodded. “So, are you going to start a memory album and you want a copy of this?”

“Eh. Not really. Kind of creepy to keep a death certificate, don’t you think?”

“Yep.”

“Actually, I don’t recall Dad ever telling me the exact day Mom died. That would be nice to know so I can, you know...think about her every year. The date of the highway patrol officer’s report was November 11, so it’s near that date. But I want to know the specific date. It will make it more real for me.”

“I understand. Glad you’re taking these steps.”

I glanced back at the screen. The credential verification message was still visible, and the cursor continued spinning. “Having the death certificate will also help me verify the location where she was buried. I assume she was buried somewhere in the Virginia Beach-Norfolk area, but I have no idea.”

When I looked again at Ezzy, she was pursing her lips. “What?”

She exhaled. “You know I wasn’t fond of your dad...at least some of his actions.”

“You mean when he set me up to be ambushed by the lunatic killer who had murdered Mark? Just that?” My sarcastic edge even caught me by surprise. “Okay...as you know, he claimed he had no idea she was a killer, just a former colleague from my training days at Quantico.”

Ezzy was wiping her mouth after chugging on her guava juice. “I don’t want to pass judgment, especially on the dearly departed, but for him not to share any of this with you...I guess it seems—”

“Selfish?”

“You nailed it.”

“Only because I lived with him.”

“What doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger.” She patted my back.

“I hear ya, sistah.” I flipped around and found a welcome message on the screen. “I think they only have one squirrel powering this website. At this pace, it might take all day to get through these sites and find everything I need. Then I need to book my travel.”

“When do you want to leave?” Ezzy slipped out of the chair, walked to her purse on the counter by the coffeemaker, and pulled out her iPad.

“It would be great if you could help. Thank you.” I strummed my fingers on the counter. “I’d like to have dinner with the kids tonight. So, maybe



tomorrow morning?"

"You could invite Brad over, and we could have our own version of a family dinner. I can make one of my new Guatemalan dishes. I'll make it a little spicy to match you and Brad."

I popped an eyebrow. "Better make it extra spicy."

We both chuckled, and then she started tapping on her screen. To enter the self-service portion of the site reserved for law enforcement agencies, I had to enter another password and wait. This time it took about five minutes.

"Finally," I said as Ezzy quietly went about doing her thing. I was proud of her for embracing technology at her advanced age.

I quickly found the search box and typed "Charlotte Troutt" and then clicked submit. Once again, the cursor spun, and a message popped up saying a search was in progress.

I strummed my fingers for a second, then downed the last of my guava juice. I finally looked over Ezzy's shoulder.

"Hey, you've got your thing to do; I've got mine," she said. "With this last-minute travel, prices are pretty high. But I'm comparing rates across multiple sites."

"Okay. Have you thought—"

She flicked her wrist at me. "I've got it under control. You work on your own task," she said playfully.

Turning my gaze back to the screen, I found a message in red lettering: *This person is not in our system. Please try another name or use a social security number.*

"Crap."

"What, dear?"

"My mother isn't showing up in their database." I rubbed my temple.

"Any way they could have...I don't know, overlooked her? This was over thirty years ago. Probably before they had much of a computer system, if any at all."

"The likelihood is low, but plausible, I suppose." I continued wracking my brain, trying to work through a scenario of how she still might be in their system, even though the search didn't find her.

I sat up in my seat and snapped my fingers. "Wait a second." I jumped out of the chair and headed for the staircase.

"Where are you going?"

"Gotta find my purse from yesterday."

She mumbled something behind me, probably wondering if I was losing it. Taking two steps at a time up the staircase, my blood was pumping in overdrive by the time I reached my room and swung a left into my closet. I walked along the back wall, searching for my black leather bag, a durable but classy purse from Coach. "There we go," I said, curling my finger under the strap and yanking it off the shelf.

I scampered down the stairs and back into the kitchen, a bit out of breath.

Ezzy had a puzzled look on her face. “What is it, Alex?” I sat the purse on the counter and began the excavation. “Something important in here that I’m pretty sure will help us out.” Since I had traveled with the bag, it had an overabundance of stuff in it—airline tickets, gum and gum wrappers, a Lisa Gardner paperback I had picked up at the airport, loose pens, a notepad, brochures from various groups that had been shoved in my face in and around the airport, and a package of tissues.

“Any luck?”

“Too much shit,” I said, now dumping items onto the counter. “Do you see a small photo?”

“Eh...” Ezzy moved things around but shook her head. It felt like we were searching for a special granule of sand in a sandbox.

“Wait...” I slid my hand in a side pocket and felt the paper edges of something rectangular. It was stuck to the leather, so I peeled it off and pulled it out.

Ezzy pointed at the photo, her eyes wide. “Is that your mother?”

I nodded. “It was on display at the funeral home, next to a few of Dad’s personal items. I guess Carly found it amongst Dad’s things and she put it out there.”

“That’s nice, although somewhat surprising.”

“Yeah. She seemed to be on her best behavior. Mario thinks she might be in line to receive an insurance policy payoff, but he said it’s just a rumor.”

“Shouldn’t that money go to you and the kids?”

“That’s what Mario said. It felt weird to think about. I don’t know. I’ll deal with it later if at all. Think about how he probably paid for that policy.”

“True, but don’t forget about your kids. They have college and who knows what else in front of them.”

I flipped the picture. “Maybe I’ll call Mario back soon and ask what he’s heard.”

“She’s beautiful, your mother.”

I took another gaze and then held the picture next to my face. “Any resemblance?”

Mom’s hair was a couple of shades darker, and it had a little more curl to it as her locks fell just below her shoulders. She even wore a nice smile.

“She reminds me of a young Judy Garland. Just stunning. And yes, I can easily see you’re related,” Ezzy said. It was hard not to smile at that. She placed a hand on my arm and asked, “So how does this old photo help us locate her record in the Virginia website?”

Turning the picture over, I thumbed the back with my finger. “I thought I recalled seeing a name. An unfamiliar name.”

It read: Charlotte Walsh.

“Is that—” Ezzy began to say.

“It’s her maiden name, and I’m guessing this is her handwriting,” I said. “Probably taken before she and Dad got married. It’s nice to actually see her

smile for a change. Besides being younger, it's strange to see her happy."

I sat on my stool and typed in my mom's maiden name and then clicked submit. As expected, the cursor started spinning.

"So why do you think you'll find it this way? Obviously your mom was married at the time she died."

"True, but as you mentioned earlier, this computer system wasn't around back then. It was probably typed in from a hard copy. And someone could have easily used her maiden name as a last name."

My mind began to think back to our days in Virginia Beach. I vaguely recalled passing by a cemetery when we used to run up to the mall. A tall row of evergreens lined the road, and I remember seeing a bulldozer digging up dirt, just visible between two trees, when we stopped at a light. I wondered if Mom was buried there. "Ah..." Ezzy said, her eyes glued to the screen.

Seconds felt like minutes. After a while, I even began to whistle a bit.

"Did the search cause the page to freeze up?"

I moved the mouse a bit. "Don't think so. Let's give it another minute before I shut down the browser and try logging in again. I'd rather not start over."

Ezzy made herself busy by trying to corral all my loose items on the counter and shuffle them back into my purse.

"I think I know why you have so many purses."

"And why is that?"

"You have so much shit, that's why."

We both laughed out loud, although it was short-lived. I was beginning to feel anxious, as if some IT nerd somewhere was trying to play games with me. I knew the thought was beyond ridiculous. I forced out a breath as the cursor continued its spin routine. "It's like waiting to see if I won the lottery."

"Kind of," Ezzy said. "In the lottery, you only have a tiny chance of winning. This search should turn up a result, as long as the server doesn't crash. Or maybe the database indexes need to be cleaned up."

I turned to stare at Ezzy for a moment. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I overheard Luke talking to all of his Minecraft friends the other night. They sounded like a bunch of computer professionals. I have no idea what I just said."

That was pretty darn funny, but I didn't laugh. I was too frustrated with the website. I smacked the counter. "Dammit, you piece of shit."

And just like that the computer gods heard me and a results page popped up.

Ezzy stopped shuffling papers and things into my purse and leaned closer to the screen.

I narrowed my eyes, as my heart pumped faster. "What the hell?"

Ezzy recited the same message we had seen earlier: "This person is not in our system. Please try another name or use a social security number."

I could feel her eyes on me. "What does this mean, Alex?"

Oxygen flooded my brain. I took a moment to get my bearings and try to think through all the possible logical conclusions. One thought split through the mental haze and became very real to me: “Ezzy, I think my mom could still be alive.”

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Three hours had passed, and I’d spent the last thirty minutes pacing back and forth in the kitchen.

“You’re going to wear a hole in your socks,” Ezzy said, still sitting at the bar amidst the mess from my purse, her iPad, and now three empty glasses. She glanced at Brad, who had rushed to the house over his lunch break and was now standing at the opposite end of the kitchen. Smart man. He knew when to give me space.

I stopped in my tracks and looked over at my friends who were trying to provide support. “What?”

Brad held his palms to the ceiling. “Want to know which way you’re leaning.”

I pondered his question, biting the inside of my cheek. I was trying to separate what I wanted to believe versus believing it and then finding out she really was dead. “I’m just not sure what I should think or what I should do.”

Brad scratched his chin. I could tell he was uncertain as well. Using our FBI connections as a rather large bat, we had been on the phone with six different people at various levels of Virginia state and county governments, asking if there could have been a mistake in the search. They brought in IT folks who actually went into the database and did their own search: neither Charlotte Troutt nor Charlotte Walsh existed amongst the death certificates on file.

“But that doesn’t rule out that it doesn’t exist in our warehouse. It’s happened before,” the senior records management director had said. The woman had gone on to say that the only way to be absolutely certain was to conduct an internal investigation, which translated into a search of their hard copies.

I looked over at Brad again. “How can I sit here and wait for them to conduct their four-to six-week search of their warehouse?”

“I...I don’t know what to say, babe. The wheels of government don’t change for anyone, it seems, regardless of how difficult it might be,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “The question is, what’s the likelihood this one fell through the cracks and wasn’t entered into the system?”

“Probably pretty low,” Ezzy said.

“Thank you,” I said.

Brad glanced out the window into the backyard, the sun illuminating a blueish tint to his gray eyes. He was a handsome man, now in deep thought.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

He turned to face me. “If your mom didn’t die from that crash, then what

was going on with your dad? He actually made you think she was dead? I can't fathom what he was thinking."

I found the counter and planted both hands on the edge, shaking my head. "And this all comes out now, after he's dead."

My gut felt like it was doing flips at a rate equivalent to the beat of my out-of-control pulse, which made it that much more difficult to think clearly. I rubbed the side of my head.

"All these years, I've been thinking Mom had died. Then we arrest the guy who was responsible for her death...or so we thought. And when I finally admitted it was time to deal with her death head-on, I find out she may still be alive. It's just too bizarre to believe." I took in a deep breath, trying to suppress my emotions a bit.

"Your father...I'm sorry, but that man..." Ezzy said, bringing a hand to her mouth.

I looked Ezzy in the eye. She had stated the obvious, yet my heart thumped against my chest even harder.

After a few seconds, Brad, my voice of reason, jumped in. "We can't bring your dad back and put him in the FBI interview room and grill him until we get the answers we want. We have no idea about his motivations, or his reasoning. So now we—"

"Motivations?" Ezzy jumped in, her voice pitching higher. "How could that man take his daughter away from her own mother? It's just unconscionable."

"Ezzy, not to take up for Dad, but do you remember some of the stories I told you? Maybe Dad just couldn't put up with her any longer."

"You're right. I wasn't there, and you were only a little kid. But if he had a real problem with her, then why didn't he just divorce her?" Silence engulfed the room for a moment. Pumpkin strolled in, his back claws softly tapping the tiled floor. He stretched dramatically, as cats tended to do, then stuck his face in his food bowl and started crunching away.

I pushed off from the counter and held up a finger. "Dad moved us to Port Isabel; we all know that. So Mom goes into the hospital, and let's say she eventually gets out. So then what? She didn't even try to come find us? To find her own daughter?"

I could hear my voice echoing, and I knew my intensity was on the rise.

"Both parents," Ezzy said, her cheeks now flush. "What were they thinking? I'm so sorry, Alex. Unfortunately, they don't issue licenses for people to have kids."

"It's so fucked up." I couldn't stop shaking my head in sheer disbelief.

Ezzy began shuffling my items into my purse, probably just to keep herself occupied. "I know this might be a reach, but what if your mom had some type of amnesia from her wreck? After all, Alex, you suffered a similar injury in your wreck earlier this year."

I shrugged my shoulders, but Brad spoke up. "It's possible, but do you

really think the hospital would release her when she couldn't recall her family?"

"They did with Alex."

"Not really. Alex basically walked out, and that was only with Nick acting as her chaperone and protector. Who did your mom have?"

I stopped shaking my head. "That last question. What if...?"

"...there was someone else in the mix?" Brad finished for me.

I let the question comingle with reality for a second. "Hold up. We're talking about my mom...the one whose mug shot shows up next to the term religious fanatic in Google."

Ezzy lifted her eyes and looked at me.

"I'm just kidding, Ezzy."

She flipped her hand in my direction. "I know that."

"You're right, Alex," Brad said. "The way you described your mom, it's hard to fathom that she would be screwing around on your dad. Especially enough to convince her to leave her family behind." He paced back and forth a few steps, still keeping his distance from me. He knew how to read me, that much was obvious.

I wiped my hand across my head, wondering if it was possible to feel more stress. Yet, at the same time, a rush of nervous energy coursed through my veins. "I'm not sure we'll ever know why she did it, why Dad didn't say anything to me. But the bottom line is that Mom might be alive, and I need to find her. Someway, somehow, I need to find my mother."

I stared straight at Brad, his compassionate eyes looking right back at me. My speeding heart calmed a bit, but at the same time fluttered in my chest.

"Alex." Ezzy interrupted our little moment. "Alex."

"Uh...yeah. Ezzy," I said, finally shifting my eyes to her.

A small envelope was clenched in her hand. "I found this stuffed between one of the brochures lying on the counter from your purse."

"That's not mine. Are you sure it came from my purse?"

She tilted her head to the side and gave me *the look*.

"Okay, I believe you," I said, walking toward her with my arm extended. "But I have no clue who put that in my purse."

"I do," she said, turning it around, then pulling it a few inches from her face. She began to read something written in pen on the backside of the envelope. "Please read this note from your dad. He wanted you to have it. Carly. P.S. I have no idea what this says. I hope you believe me."

I took the envelope from Ezzy and quickly noticed it was sealed shut.

"I don't think Carly wanted to see what was inside," Brad said, moving next to me. He nudged my arm and I leaned against him.

On the front of the envelope, I saw my name written in Dad's chicken-scratch handwriting. I recalled him often shaking when he was writing a check at the grocery store. Probably related to one of his monster hangovers.

I opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper.

“What does it say?” Ezzy asked.

I heard her words, but it was impossible to respond. My mouth became parched, and I could feel my airways closing up.

“Alex, are you okay?” Ezzy asked as Brad put his hand on my back. “Tell me. What did that bastard say?”

I looked up and flicked my wrist, snapping the piece of paper. “He starts off by telling me how sorry he is for not telling me about what happened to Mom and that he didn’t know what to do, so he just moved us as far away as the Coast Guard would allow.”

I licked my lips and fought to keep my emotions in check.

Ezzy’s hand went to her mouth. “What happened?”

“Mom...well, according to Dad, Mom was brainwashed by one of the deacons of our church. Dad believed she was slowly losing touch with reality, and then after the accident, she ran off with him. Dad thinks the man was essentially trying to start his own...” A wave of emotion temporarily cut off my ability to speak.

I tried to complete my thought. “Dad said he believed the man was recruiting Mom as part of an effort to start his own religious cult.”

Ezzy gasped. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Brad rubbing my back, but I couldn’t feel a thing.

Finally, Ezzy spoke up. “A letter from the dead. How appropriate.”

The truck coughed, sputtered, and then finally turned over, the engine settling into its normal droning growl. It would have been easy for the silver-haired woman sitting in the passenger's seat of the sixteen-year-old pickup to let the rhythmic cadence lull her to sleep. Last night had been filled with grunts and shrills, both pained and euphoric, depending on the perspective.

From her perspective, it was simply another night of hell.

She looked over her shoulder and watched the big, hairy man, who appeared much older than his twenty-three years of age, lift the young ladies into the bed of the pickup. Each wore gray bonnets and dresses, their shoes dingy, black flats. Four lucky souls had earned the right to make the weekly trip to the county store, but as usual, there was only a single winter jacket. With temperatures hovering in the upper thirties, and a low, gray sky chopping off the tops of the enormous pines, the jacket's value was particularly high. Jamin, an elder of Camp Israel, had bestowed the honor to Shiloh. The meaning of her name in Hebrew was 'tranquil.' The camp's elders had named her Shiloh because she rarely cried following her birth. She seemed at peace, the council of men had said.

But last night the woman was almost certain the ear-piercing screams had come from Shiloh, her youthful voice painfully echoing through the bare hallways. Shiloh had been raped by Jamin, and his gift to her was to allow her to wear a jacket in the brutal cold to the store.

That was fucked up.

The woman seethed inside as she thought about what Shiloh had given up just to stay warm. The sixteen-year-old girl with pale skin found her spot in the corner of the truck, her tiny arms wrapped around her body, which was engulfed by the oversized jacket. Stuffing spilled out in five places where the coat had been torn. The elders said they had to ration the coat to those who deserved it most—a practice they often used for any incentive inside Camp Israel. Yet, the woman had seen new coats dispensed to twenty men just a month earlier, when they conducted an emergency alertness drill and they were sent into the woods around their compound to man their stations.

Since her very first day in the camp, they had been told—rather, instructed—that they could never trust outsiders. The non-believers. Satanists. And every decision in the camp seemed to feed off of trust, or the lack thereof.

The woman was jarred out of her daze, as another girl in the back had smacked Shiloh across the face. It was Jaala. The woman quickly reached for the door handle and tugged, but it didn't budge. She lifted her eyes and saw the deep stare of Ezra.

"Hold up, Beulah. When it gets physical, you know I gotta handle this."



The man, who with each passing day looked more like a brown bear, hopped into the bed of the truck and lifted Jaala off her feet. The young girl was kicking and swinging her arms, her eyes shooting spears into Shiloh, the defenseless girl with the jacket.

“I want to rip your fucking eyes out, you fucking bitch. You’re nothing but a whore who was sent from the depths of hell to ruin my life,” Jaala screamed. “Let me go, dammit. Shiloh is a whore and all whores must die!”

Ezra tucked the wild child under his arm like she was a sack of potatoes. His boots hit the ground, and Beulah could hear him chuckling. It was all a game to him, the girls nothing more than a sideshow, as long as they followed the rules—those that came from the Good Book, and those that weren’t written in any book. It had taken a long while to understand the culture of Camp Israel and those who had founded it. But for many, especially those who were younger and experiencing normal rebellious feelings, their defiance was met with a harsh reality: they would suffer in ways they couldn’t comprehend until they were broken. And Beulah knew that even the heartiest would eventually break.

Beulah watched Ezra open the side screen door to the main house and then dump Jaala inside. One of the elders took her in his arms and guided her into the darkness. With her eyes now gazing at Shiloh hovering in the corner, she could see tears streaming across red cheeks.

Clenching her teeth, Beulah opened her door and stepped outside. She reached out to Shiloh, resting a gentle hand against Shiloh’s ear. The girl nestled against it, but it didn’t stop her crying.

“Shh. It’s okay, Shiloh,” Beulah said in a calm voice. She glanced up and saw Ezra walking off the small porch, but Shiloh’s sobbing continued. “Dear, you can cry when you go to sleep tonight. For now, you need to be strong. It’s for your own good.”

“But...but why did Jaala say those awful things about me? I try to be a good person, to follow the teachings of Malachi and his elders, and now I’m persecuted. I...I don’t understand.”

Beulah gripped the young girl’s shoulder. “Shiloh, you are young, and only when you get older will you better understand why people do and say things. Life isn’t always fair, but we can’t forget how fortunate we are to have this life.”

Shiloh sniffled a couple of times. “Why did Jamin...do those things to me? He hurt me.”

Her breath stuck in the back of her throat. “I...I’m so sorry. It—”

“You, back in the truck,” Ezra barked, pointing a finger at Beulah. She removed her hand and stepped backward. The enormous man hopped into the bed of the truck and barreled over to Shiloh, but turned his head to ensure the two other girls could hear him.

“Scripture tells us, ‘And not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation. A generation that did not prepare its heart. And whose

spirit was not faithful to God.' Now, you girls can't be acting like wild horses. It ain't proper or right. Not at Camp Israel. You gotta do your work, thank the good Lord you have proper food and shelter and a whole community of people who care and love you, and grow up a little and get along. Do you hear me? Am I being clear?"

All three muttered *yes sir* under their breaths.

"Okay, now," Ezra said, clapping his hands. "It's a glorious day, so take in some good, clean air, and let's enjoy this time of fellowship."

He hopped over the edge of the truck and motioned for Beulah to get into the cab. Once both doors were shut, she said, "Ezra, given what we just experienced, don't you think it's best that I ride in the back with the girls? I think they need some womanly guidance."

Squeezing the steering wheel inside his beefy fingers, Ezra began to pump out breaths, his gaze looking straight ahead into the narrow dirt road that snaked through woods and eventually to Highway 5, the main road.

"Ezra, I'm not trying to upset you. I only want to help the girls learn from this episode, to bring faith and forgiveness into their hearts, and, of course, loyalty to those who follow our ways at Camp Israel."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" He flipped his head to look straight at her, spit flying out of his mouth.

"I never said that, Ezra. You are a gracious, good person. And yes, you are very smart. Far smarter than me," she said, bowing her head slightly.

"You know the rules, Beulah. A lady's place is in the seat, next to the man. Even if I ain't your husband, you belong here, next to me. That's the way it's supposed to work in the world. You should know that, right?" With emotion coursing through his veins, his voice pitched an octave higher.

"Of course, Ezra. You are right." She placed her hands in her lap and looked straight ahead. A moment later, he slipped the gearshift into drive, and the truck motored forward.

Halfway through the mile-long route to the main road, Ezra finally spoke up. "You know I don't like using my position of power to hurt you, Beulah."

"That's why I said you're a good man, Ezra. I truly believe that," she said, feigning admiration for him.

He nodded and gave her a straight-lipped smile. "I remember all those stories you used to tell me when I was younger, about you changing my diapers and all. And here we are now, twenty-something years later and look at us." He turned his head and winked. "We're almost acting like an old married couple."

It took everything in her power to force out a smile. At the same time, she was confused with his odd and untimely flirtation. There were numerous girls in the compound near his age; yet, for some reason he never attempted to bed any of those young ladies, who were more energetic and, frankly, more attractive. She had been forced to have sex with countless men in the compound, although all had been near her age. Once considered one of the

trophies in the camp, time had caught up with her, and the torch had been passed on to the next generation.

At sixty-one years old, the aging process couldn't have happened fast enough.

She had begged her Maker for most of three decades that she would turn ugly or age more quickly, anything to keep the leeches from invading her body. She once even sliced her face with broken glass, leaving a scar to the side of her lip as a reminder of that time in her life. When she was the rebel.

"I have plenty of stories about changing your diapers, Ezra, but I don't want to embarrass you. Let's focus on what we need to get at the store."

The bumpy ride finally reached the main road. Ezra turned left, and as the so-called family made their way into town, Beulah dreamed of days when she spent time with her own family. And she cried inside the entire road trip.

The MD-80 touched down at Norfolk International Airport and taxied up to the gate, its engine reduced to a whining purr as the quiet cabin came to life with laughter and shouting voices. A stewardess squawked instructions over the speaker system, but it was impossible to hear her exact words. The race to grab overhead bags and get the best place in line had already commenced. The patients, termed passengers before we had been led like cattle into the airplane, were more than ready to burst through the doors of the flying asylum.

After watching two kids wrestle over who got to carry a miniature pillow with two flying dolphins on it—their mom gave them both a piece of bubble gum to stop the argument before it escalated—I turned to peek through the oval window from seat 24C. The ground crew wore clear rain slickers over their gray uniforms and fluorescent-orange vests. Their slickers fluttered from gusts of wind, likely bringing in another round of storms. Even as dark clouds balled up into fists, the rain had paused, at least temporarily.

“So, you’re just like me, aren’t you?”

A man’s round face appeared over the seats in front of me, his hair slicked back with some type of oily gel. He wore a grin from ear to ear. He looked like he was my dad’s age.

“Not really following you,” I said, craning my neck to look up front. I suddenly wished the pack of humans could vacate the airplane more quickly.

“Oh, sorry about that. I have the tendency to say things as if people know what I’m thinking inside my head,” he said with a snicker. “Silly me. By the way, I’m Ray. I sell insurance.” He stretched his arm over the seat. Maybe he was trying to shake my hand?

His head banged the plastic overhead bin as he raised his body to where the top of the seat would reach his armpit. “There,” he said, attempting to get his arm over the seat to better facilitate a handshake. “Now, to properly introduce myself. I’m Ray.” His hand was still a few inches above my head, so I reached up with two fingers and a thumb and shook his hand. It was awkward, just like our brief interaction.

“I’m Alex.” I turned to look outside again, the air around me now drenched with a pungent cologne. Or was that the gel?

“And what do you do?”

Revealing that I was employed by the FBI as a special agent was not in the cards. Not in a public setting and not to Ray the insurance salesman. “I’m in security.”

“Well, I was just thinking that we have something in common.” He paused, maybe waiting for me to hit him with a question. I pretended to see something interesting outside.

“We both abhor crowds, especially when people are so pushy and rude. Am I right?”

I nodded. “I think you nailed it, Ray.”

“You see, we do have something in common. So, are you from this area, or do you have business in the Norfolk-Virginia Beach area?”

Why did it seem as if the volume of his voice had slowly increased? I took another glance up front; there was finally movement. I shifted to one knee and began to lift my things from the floorboard up to the empty seat next to me.

“Just flying in to do a little business.”

“Hmm,” he said, tapping his forefinger to his chin. “You work in *security*.” He used air quotes. “And you’re just flying in to do a *little business*.” More air quotes. His face cracked another all-star smile. “I’d say you’re a hit woman sent in by a secret government agency to take out the head of an international crime syndicate hell-bent on using the threat of biological weapons to milk the country of billions of dollars.” He chuckled before he added, “Am I getting close?”

“You have no idea how close.”

Finally, the line of cattle moved forward and someone asked Ray if he wanted to get out. He obliged, but for some reason kept his eye on me the entire time he made his way into the aisle.

“Seriously, Alex, I’ve lived in this area my whole life. If you need to know anything about it, how to get around, how to get things done, I can help you out.”

I was now three people behind him in the procession to the front of the plane. “Great. Thanks, Ray. I’ll keep that in mind. Oh, watch out!” It was too late. He had just mowed over a tiny stewardess, who screeched, and then kicked at Ray until he stopped pawing at her to help her up.

More delays.

It took another five minutes before the entanglement cleared and associated ill will from the stewardess was sufficiently resolved before we were allowed off the human petri dish. Halfway up the ramp, Ray found me again and started yapping my ear off. He had ceased the interrogation and had now moved into a soliloquy about his life and the area in general. I heard mostly white noise as I searched for baggage claim—I’d arrived late to the airport earlier this morning since Brad had insisted on driving me so I had to check my bag. I didn’t mind when he gave me a warm smooch before I went through security.

“And that’s why my parents called me the big mistake.” Ray chuckled and searched my face for a response as we walked up to the empty, motionless carousel.

“I guess we’ll have to wait a few minutes,” I said, pulling out my phone.

“Did you not...? Oh, never mind.”

I think I hurt his feelings. Out of the corner of my eye, it appeared he was

looking around for someone else to pounce on. Fine by me.

“Alex, can you actually hear me?” he said, lowering his vision until his eyes were about a foot from my face. I leaned back.

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. I thought you might have in earplugs. I need to use the restroom. Could you watch my backpack until I get back?”

“No problem.”

He turned to walk away, and I said, “Take as much time as you need.”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, his brow furrowed. He must have finally caught on that I wasn’t his biggest fan. The carousel began to move and I shuffled closer, towing my oversized purse and Ray’s bag a few feet.

As I waited for baggage to appear on the ramp that connected to the circular carousel, I took a moment to reflect on my decision to go at this alone. I had called Jerry and Nick last night, letting them know I was taking a few days off to try to find my mother. They asked questions and offered their support. What I didn’t tell them was I was fully prepared to let days turn into weeks, which meant a leave of absence. Putting a specific timeline on an investigation was ludicrous, especially one where the trail was as cold as thirty-two years. I also knew that extending my time away from my paying gig with the FBI would have an impact on the family bottom line. But I’d have to deal with that if and when the time came. I would have never been able to sleep a peaceful night while wondering if my mom was still alive, wondering what she was doing...who she was with.

Did she have another family? Did she now have grandkids?

I gripped my cell phone tightly in my hand and tried to not think the worst, but it was difficult to delineate worst-versus best-case scenarios.

Last night I had a peaceful dinner with the kids and only told them that I had an important mission to accomplish, keeping my mother out of the conversation. I just couldn’t bring myself to dump even more family baggage on them. After a summer vacation in Port Isabel that put their lives in danger, seeing their grandfather mixed up with a drug cartel, and now hearing about his death, the last thing they needed was more drama. Ezzy knew the details, and that was good enough for now. Brad had initially insisted on coming with me. He said he knew we’d be a good team—even better than what we’d shown between the sheets. But I couldn’t drag him into this crap. I cared for him too much. Plus, I felt more comfortable with him at home base, checking in on Ezzy and the kids. And I knew I might need his access to FBI resources to help me.

But first I had to make a dent in the investigation. My first stop was going to be the Virginia Beach Police Department. From there, I might have to visit the old folks home to find anyone who might have been associated with Mom’s wreck or trying to find her—if indeed she was deemed missing.

Looking over my shoulder, I didn’t see any sign of Ray. Maybe he was the hit man, posing as an insurance salesman, and had left me with his

backpack full of explosives. I chuckled at my active imagination.

Staring at the phone, I took in a breath, pondering my next move.

“What the hell?” I said out loud and then tapped the screen three times until the line started to ring.

Just as I saw my green bag sliding onto the carousel, someone picked up but didn’t say anything.

“Archie, are you on the line?”

“Yeah, this is Archie, what can I do you for?”

“It’s me, Alex, you dumbass.”

A former agent for the CIA, Archie and I went way back—but not *on* my back, as he had tried on more than one occasion. He thought he was a ladies’ man, but he was more like a man who slobbered over ladies of questionable character until they either ran like crazy or turned out to be crazy. Still, his gregarious, overconfident demeanor had actually helped him build a decent private investigation business. And I knew that he’d jump at the chance to work with me.

There was prolonged silence on the other end of the line, although I heard the clinging of glasses.

“Archie, it’s ten in the morning, and you’re already drinking? What are you thinking, or are you working undercover on some case where you have to drink in the morning?”

More silence. “What do you think I do for a living?”

That was an odd question. It sounded like he hadn’t heard my question, or even recognized that it was me. “Okay, dork. Turn off your little routine. I need to talk to you—”

He chuckled. “If you haven’t figured it out yet, this is a recording.”

I held the phone away from my face. I was ready to drop the phone and crush it with my shoe.

“Just wanted to show off some of my skills. Obviously, you’ve reached me, Archie Woods Private Investigations, LLC. That stands for limited liability corporation. Yep, I’ve gone big time, bitches.”

He laughed at himself again.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’re dying to talk to me about an intriguing case. No worries, just leave a message and either I or my new assistant, Carrie, will get back with you. Now, if you’d like to know more about my background, see referrals, and generally become impressed with me and my advanced investigative skills, go to [whiteshaft.com](http://whiteshaft.com). Don’t let that name scare you. It’s all PG-13...well, except for one testimonial where she talks about my...uh, forget I ever said that. Hey, Carrie, take that testimonial off the website, okay? Anyway, if anyone is still listening, leave a message at the tone or go to [whiteshaft.com](http://whiteshaft.com). Once again, that’s [whiteshaft.com](http://whiteshaft.com). Later.”

The line beeped. “Nice bit, Archie. It’s Alex. I think I need you. Call me. And by the way, your whole [whiteshaft.com](http://whiteshaft.com) website...not a good idea. Either people are offended, or they couldn’t care less if your shaft is white, red, or a

swirl of rainbow colors. Okay, call me.”

The line went dead, and I turned to see Ray’s smiling grill in my face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Are you into painting shafts? Because if you are...”

I stuck my hand in his face, grabbed my bag off the carousel, and walked off.

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After picking up my rental car—a five-year-old Camry that smelled like a bar before they changed the smoking laws—I made the short trip to the Virginia Beach Police Department. Thirty-two years had passed since I’d last inhabited Virginia Beach, but on the drive, I remembered something unique about the area: travel time to most places in and around the Norfolk-Virginia Beach area was relatively swift, aside from summer holidays when roads became filled with tourists.

The temperature gauge on the Camry read forty-nine degrees just before I turned off the engine and walked into the brick facade building. Thunder rumbled in the background as the door shut behind me. A couple of heads turned my way, but one held my gaze. The first face of the department, a thin woman with short, crimped hair and a pair of glasses that hung from a chain around her neck. I used the weather as an icebreaker and then showed Dolly my FBI credentials as an introduction into why I was there. I gave her the thirty-second version of my story.

“Hold on a minute. Let me get someone.” Her eyes stayed on me as she picked up the desk phone. She paused before dialing a number, then set the receiver down. “I’ll be right back.” Pulling her white sweater tighter around her shoulders, she walked off. I noticed she had on simple, white sneakers.

While I waited for more than a couple of minutes, I checked out a few of the awards and plaques inside two glass cases. Nothing to set the world on fire.

“Agent Troutt?”

I turned to see an attractive, younger man with thick, curly hair, wearing khakis and a starched denim shirt, approaching me. He had a 9mm pistol holstered at his side.

He said his name, but I didn’t catch it because he had already turned to walk me to the back. He seemed like he was in a rush. He sat me in a chair and said Lieutenant Detective Morris would be with me shortly.

Over the next hour, the same detective offered me a drink at least a half dozen times. I would say “no thank you” and then look at the time on my phone. He would apologize for his boss’s delay, usually shrugging his shoulders at the same time.

Eighty-seven minutes into my wait, I was actually thirsty and getting a little annoyed that my status with the FBI wouldn’t have garnered a bit more responsiveness. The curly-haired detective approached me again.



“Hey,” he said.

“Look, I realize you had no warning of my visit, but I was hoping for a little professional courtesy...”

He moved out of the way to reveal a woman standing behind him. I had two quick observations: she was petite, and her head of frizzy hair looked like a beehive about ready to burst open. She had it roped behind her in some type of ponytail.

“Lieutenant Detective Anne Morris,” she said with a single nod. Her grip was firm. I did my best to match it, just to keep all things equal. “Apologize for the wait, Agent Troutt.”

She ushered me into her office and closed the door. She lived in a fishbowl, almost literally. Glass walls and a glass door surrounded her.

“Nice view,” I said.

“I’m a visual person. It helps remind me who is around, who isn’t. And then I’ve got this to remind me who is working which case, at least the high profile cases,” she said, pointing at a whiteboard that was bigger than her five-foot-nothing frame. She propped her feet on her desk and leaned back in her chair. That was when she noticed her hair clip was about to fall off. She did her best to corral the mound of hair into a tighter ponytail.

“Again, I apologize for keeping you waiting. Sometimes the brass doesn’t care about anyone’s schedule except their own. Politics,” she said with her palms facing upward as she sat straighter in the chair. “I’m sure you deal with that kind of stuff every day of your work life.”

“Eh. I’ve got a pretty good team around me, and my food chain tends to stay clear. But I know what you mean. Seems like there’s always that level of leadership where they don’t breathe the same type of oxygen.”

She smacked her hand on the table and chuckled once. “Oh, we’re going to get along well, Agent Troutt.”

“Alex, please.”

“Call me Anne.” Her smile became a straight line. “I understand your visit is both professional and personal. The worst kind of case.” Her dark, close-set eyes looked up at me for a second.

We discussed the details of what I knew and what I was seeking—mainly her team’s help with access to case files and speaking to anyone involved, if they were still around.

“You can work with Detective Ed Romano.”

I turned around, glancing through the blinds of her glass walls and noticed just one person standing. “Ahh, that’s his name. I missed that earlier. Isn’t he quite busy?”

“Everyone is. Understaffed, yet the chief wants every case closed yesterday. Gotta make the mayor happy. Is it election season or something?” She waved a hand and rolled her eyes.

She walked me out to Detective Romano’s desk, and then she pulled him aside to apparently give him the good news: he had more work on his plate.

They both turned around a moment later, his hands buried in his pockets, but Anne spoke. “Romano understands your urgency. If you need anything or get a break on your mother, please keep him and me in the loop. It’s always a shot in the arm when we can solve one of our cold cases. And it doesn’t get much colder than thirty-two years.”

She walked away, and Romano moved behind his desk, picked up a couple of manila folders, leafed through each one, and then tossed them back on his desk.

“Want to get a sandwich?” he asked.

“Well, I was hoping we could dig into your files, see if there are any leads to speak of and then prioritize our next steps.”

“I think better when I’m eating, especially if it’s a muffuletta. My wife runs a little shop down the street. I’ll bring my laptop and any hard copies I can find here at the office. You game?”

A motivated detective couldn’t hurt. “I’m game.”

Thirty minutes later, Romano’s eyes glazed over as his wife slid the muffuletta on the table. He already had a napkin tucked inside his shirt, apparently expecting the feeding frenzy to lead to spillage. He devoured a quarter of the sandwich with the first bite.

“You like it, Romano?” I thought it was neat that his wife, who even looked like her husband with her tight, curly hair and thick frame, called her husband by his last name.

He tried speaking, but olives squeezed out of the corner of his mouth. Then he started laughing. “Did I tell you that you need to improve your manners, Romano? Geez, you’re an embarrassment to the family name,” she said with a snort.

“Hey, at least I don’t laugh like a wild hog.”

She leaned down and kissed him. That was apparently an intimate moment in their love life.

Out of nowhere a white kitchen towel sailed through the serving booth and landed right on the faces of the two lovebirds. And then the catcalls began from voices in the back.

“Ah, shut your faces,” she said, pinching off a bit of his sandwich and eating it.

I could hear an accent in those words. I shoved in a bite of my grilled chicken Caesar salad, then asked, “Are you two from this area originally?”

“We get asked that all the time,” Romano said, dabbing his extra napkin at his mouth. “We’re both full-blooded Italian. You know, the whole Ellis Island route last century. My pop moved down here when he was younger because Ma didn’t want him being a cop in the Bronx. She was always the worrywart.”

“So you’ve got blue-blood lines.”

He nodded while taking a smaller bite. “Two brothers are on the NYPD, but I stayed down here. Couldn’t resist this woman here.”

“Gotta get back to work. You two enjoy the food. It’s on the house.”

“Of course it is,” he said, swatting his hand backward and smacking her on the ass.

She squealed, but appeared to expect it, maybe even like it.

Romano quickly became more engaged in the case and began to ask me questions. He then paused and started to use his least greasy fingers to click and tap on the laptop he’d pulled from his bag.

“Bringing up the original file on the hit-and-run,” he said.

“Well, not sure if I mentioned this, but we think we know who did it. We interviewed him in our Boston office yesterday, a Douglass Butterfield. Was never arrested.”

“He just opened up and spilled the beans?” Romano asked, picking up smaller pieces of salami off his plate and eating them.

“From the way he was acting, I’m not sure Butterfield has had a moment of peace since he took his first drink at age twelve. Alcohol got the best of him, and it’s been a hellish roller coaster ever since. We found him in a bar on the verge of setting a bartender on fire. He’d recently killed his wife and her boyfriend—the Boston police chief.”

“No shit?”

I nodded.

“I read about all that. Like a frickin’ soap opera or something.” He picked up his iced tea and took a nice long chug, then leaned in closer to his computer.

“Hmm,” he said.

“What?”

“I’ll get to it. So, let’s see if there was a missing-persons report filed,” he said, already clicking on his mouse pad.

“Okay, I just want to know if the officer who first found the wreck is still around. Wait, did you say missing-persons report? I don’t think you’ll find anything. My dad said in his note to me that he just moved us once she disappeared. I think he was trying to run as fast away from her as she was from us.”

He tapped his forefinger to the screen. “Right here. Missing-persons report.”

“From who?” I could feel my chest tighten, wondering if my dad had, again, told another lie, or at least screwed up the facts.

“Says here, it was a Dr. Marques Cooper.” His lips moved as his finger trailed across the screen. “Okay, he was her treating doctor at Norfolk Community Hospital.”

“So that makes sense. She walks out of the hospital, and they call the cops. My dad probably told them he didn’t care, or he didn’t respond at all. Then, the hospital, her doctor, might have thought her life was in danger, so they filed the report.”

He nodded, then gulped down more tea.

“What do you see?”

“Well, what you just said pretty much sums up the missing-persons report. I guess you’re a mind reader in your FBI gig.”

“Something like that. What else does it show?”

“Gives her basic condition at the time she walked out. Had suffered a concussion and a broken arm, bruised ribs, a broken nose, and cuts and abrasions all over her body. In fact, it actually states they had yet to remove all the glass from her shoulder.” Romano lifted his sights to me. “She was in pretty bad shape. Surprised she even wanted to leave the hospital.”

I let that sink in a moment. “The note from my dad said that Mom ran off with a deacon from our church, saying something about starting a religious cult. Who knows if that’s true? Could just be an excuse Dad gave so he wouldn’t feel guilty taking me away.”

Romano scratched a bed of thick stubble on his chin.

“Any other details that might help us?” I asked.

“Hold on. There’s a link to the related investigation of the report. And if I click here...” His voice trailed off as he tapped the mousepad a few times, likely scrolling down the page. I couldn’t see the screen, so I took another bite of my salad and then pushed it aside.

“How long did the investigation last?”

He inched higher in his seat, his eyes narrowing on the screen.

“What is it, Romano?”

He did a double take. “Umm, well, first things first. Looks like the last entry was about a year after she left the hospital.” He paused.

“And?”

“Two things of interest. First, about six months after she walked out, there was a note about a supposed sighting of her at a drugstore in Hopewell, Virginia.”

“She’d survived her initial injuries,” I said softly, my eyes drifting to the salad plate for a moment.

“Apparently.”

“Any follow-up on the lead in Hopewell?”

“Uh, says here that after the original sighting, local cops in Hopewell tried to track her down, but they didn’t make any progress. No use of credit cards in her name, no checks used, and no reservations made at any local motels.”

I made a mental note of all the follow-ups. Apparently I was using my fingers to count them off, because Romano said, “Counting out all the leads to follow up on?” He nodded toward my hand—sure enough, my fingers were mid-count.

“I know we don’t have anything solid, but this just adds a few things to my list,” I said as Mrs. Romano walked by.

“Get you anything else?” she asked as she balanced three plates on a single arm.

“You know I could go for seconds.” Romano smiled and patted his

stomach, which appeared pretty flat from my view. "But we only have so many ways to work it off, right, Patricia?"

"Come on, Romano." She shifted her eyes to me. Her cheeks turned a shade of pink. "You don't want to air our love life to everyone in the restaurant, do ya?"

"Ahh, I'm just playing with you." He reached over and tickled her rib cage. A plate slipped, and she had to quickly use her opposite hand to keep the stack from falling to the floor.

"Jesus, Romano. Sometimes you can just..." She shook her head and walked away, mumbling something under her breath.

"She's such a jokester," he said, swatting a hand at her, then turning his attention back to his laptop.

"You had said there were two things of interest in the investigation notes. What's the second?"

"Right," He repositioned himself in the booth, clasped his hands on the table, and faced me. "It's the investigator. The same person investigated the hit-and-run as well as the missing person."

"Odd on one hand, but considering this person probably had a decent idea of my mom's background, it made sense to put him or her on the missing-persons case. The real question is...is this person still with the force? Or maybe we should start with whether they're even alive."

He leaned his head back for a moment. I could see the muscles in his jaw clench a bit.

"What is it?"

"The detective isn't with the force."

"But he or she is still alive?"

He nodded, although it was a slow nod.

"What aren't you telling me, Romano?"

He cleared his throat. "The detective's name is Anthony Romano. It's my dad."

I sat in stunned silence for a few seconds, until my brain had fully processed this new information. I scooted to the edge of the booth seat. "What are we waiting on? Let's go see him." I glanced around, looking for Romano's wife. "Wait, our food was free, right? So we can roll out of here right now." I stood up, hooking my purse strap over my shoulder.

He motioned his head for me to sit back down.

"What's wrong?" I asked, sitting my butt on the edge of the seat.

"Pop..." He cleared his throat again. "Pop's in one of those homes. He's got dementia. You know, his memory is full of holes."

"I'm sorry. I'm sure that isn't easy on your family."

"Yeah, especially on Ma. Not exactly enjoying her glory years, but she makes the best of it. And still, Pop has his days. Just last week he was telling me all about the '58 Yankees that beat the Braves in the World Series. He could even recite the season stats for most of the roster: Whitey Ford, Mickey

Mantle, Yogi Berra. So, his mind is still active, and every once in a while, like last week, he throws us a curveball.”

“That’s cool.” Romano and his family seemed close, yet his life still had a fair amount of stress and sadness, all because they were that close. I realized that having a sound family still didn’t guarantee lifelong happiness.

“Okay, if your dad is off the list, then I need to get to my top priority and visit our old church. Might be a difficult conversation there. After that, I want to drop by the hospital, just in case I can get someone to recall my mom and if she mentioned where she was going. You want to join me?”

He shut his computer and lifted from his seat. “You can go to the hospital. It’s only a couple of miles from here. While you’re there, I’ll drop by to see Pop and see if this is one of his good days.”

“You sure you want to do that?”

“Yeah. It’s one of his cases. He might get into it. The doctors say connecting with old memories can only be a good thing for him.”

We agreed to meet up in an hour.

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I sat in a high-back chair and took in the smells of the Virginia Beach Home for Senior Citizens. It was surprisingly pleasant. I realized there was a vase of fresh flowers on a round table in the foyer of the main social area, an assortment of colors and variations. I could also pick up a hint of food, maybe a meatloaf.

I’d just walked in the door after a brief, but mainly useless visit at the hospital. The doctors who had cared for Mom had all left the hospital long ago and most had died, including Dr. Johnson. In speaking with Human Resources, they did say that one of the nurses assigned to Mom, a Monique Trimble, had worked at the hospital for thirty-five years and had just retired and moved to Boston to live near her kids.

I lifted my head and scanned the three entry points into the large area, looking for Romano. He had texted me fifteen minutes ago saying I should drop by, that his dad was in good spirits. I pulled out my phone and sent off a quick group text to Brad and Nick, asking if they could try to locate Nurse Trimble and then, if they found her, to question her about my mother. My phone dingd a few seconds later. It was a personal text from Brad.

*Making progress?*

I responded with: *Not a lot, but VBPD is helping.*

The three dots started flashing again, so I knew he was typing.

*Wish I was there to help you. I’ll start looking for the nurse. Thinking of you.*

I heard voices enter the room. It was Romano and a smaller, grayer version of Romano. Mini-Romano.

I typed a quick last note to Brad.

*Back at ya.*

As soon as I tapped send, I realized how lame my message was. Couldn't I have said something caring, or even sexy?

"Hey, Alex," Romano said.

I stood up.

"This is Pop. You can call him—"

"You can call me Pop," the shorter Romano said. "Everyone thinks they need to speak for me." He leaned in closer and shook my hand. "Believe me, it's not necessary. I understand you're with the FBI?"

"Yes sir."

He nodded. "Have a seat. They're free, unlike just about everything else around here."

Romano rolled his eyes from behind his dad's back, and we all sat down.

"Did Romano, I mean Ed, give you an idea of why I wanted to speak to you?"

"Because I'm a legend in my own mind, right?" He chuckled hard, his eyes just slits. But it was infectious, and it also broke some of the tension of the topic—my mom's life.

He tapped me on the knee and said, "Tell me everything, Alex. I'll do anything I can to help you."

And I did exactly that for the next ten minutes. At the end, I blew out a breath. "Sorry if that was the long version."

Mini-Romano just sat there and stared at me. Shifting my eyes over to Romano, I began to wonder if his dad had drifted to another time, another place during my monologue.

"Pop, you okay?"

A second passed, then Pop slowly turned his head to his son. "I'm not deaf. I'm just studying Alex and thinking about Charlotte thirty-two years ago. I can definitely see a resemblance. You look more, uh...athletic, but she was a striking woman, even without any makeup."

"Thanks...I think."

"No offense. You're beautiful too."

I tapped him on the knee this time. "You're one of the few people who has fond memories of my mom. It means a lot." I swallowed back an unexpected surge of emotion. "I know it was a long time ago, but is there anything that comes to mind that might not have been in your investigative notes?"

He started pulling the hair from his overgrown eyebrow. I looked over at Romano.

"Pop does that when he's thinking."

A screaming child ran through the foyer, yelling something about not getting the candy that his mom had promised. The mom's heels clipped off the tile floors, not gaining much ground. Another glance and Pop was still tugging away on his eyebrow. Pop didn't seem to notice or hear anything around him.

"That's it," he said, eyeing something off to my right. He leaned forward

and pointed at a table where a Bible sat on top.

"I'm not sure if I put this in my notes or not, but something the Hopewell police officer told me..."

Another pause. Romano put his hand on his dad's back. "And?"

His father shook his head as if he were jarring himself back to the here and now. "So, I was just about to close the investigation, or put it on the backburner, when the Hopewell police officer called me back."

"So this was after the original sighting?" I asked.

"Yeah. Two, three months later, he calls me back and said he found out there was another employee in the gas station at the time. Not the main clerk, but a guy stocking shelves. He told the cop there was another man with your mom, although the man wasn't being very obvious about it."

I remained calm on the outside, but my pulse clocked faster.

"Did the employee provide a description of this man?"

"It was generic. White guy, medium build, medium height. Nothing stood out."

My thoughts quickly jumped to Dad's assertion that Mom had been urged, if not coerced, by a deacon at the church to run off and join some type of radical cult. While I hadn't dismissed Dad's theory, I could also imagine him inserting an opinion or even a justification for his actions in moving us away.

"Alex, did you hear Pop?" Romano said.

"Uh, right, the average-looking man who was with Mom. That's good to know."

"No, the other part, about what he called her," Romano said.

Suddenly I felt like I'd had a senior moment.

"Sorry, my brain was already jumping ahead to how this news connects to the note from my father. Can you repeat what you said, Pop?"

"Sure thing. According to the Hopewell cop, the employee said he overheard the man saying the woman's name, and he didn't call her Charlotte."

I could feel the area between my eyes grow tight. "What did he call her?"

"Beulah. He was sure of it."

I flipped around and glanced at the black, bound book on the table, then turned back to the men. "A biblical name." Both men nodded.

"To your old church?" Romano stood up and twirled his keys around his finger.

Pop reached up and touched my forearm. "I'm sorry about not adding this information to the case file. When I was younger, I was a bit forgetful. Go figure." He turned his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"We just got our first big break. And that's because of you and that mind of yours. Not many people could have done that."

His smile warmed my heart all the way to the church.



The painted wood sign on the front lawn looked clean, yet antiquated, as if someone had gone back in time about thirty years and pulled it into present day. Beyond that, however, the nondenominational church had propelled itself into the twenty-first century. I paused at the edge of the parking lot, allowing myself to take in everything that had changed since I was seven years old. For starters, the church wasn't contained to a single building. The original structure, which looked more like a double-wide, was off to the side, maybe used for administration offices or smaller classes. Next to it was a new structure that had obviously been designed by a modern architect, with a stone facade, sharp angles, and a plethora of stained glass, including a huge, eye-catching pane just below the cross that was affixed to the top of the highest point of the building. It had to be at least a hundred feet high.

"Bring back memories?" Romano asked.

"Eh...not yet. It's all pretty new."

I noticed a woman in dark sunglasses walking on the concrete path that led from the old building to the new building. I held up a hand, but paused before calling out. She didn't turn her head, and then she disappeared through a side door.

Romano and I walked around the lawn and aimed for the same metal-framed door.

"You hear anything about this church being associated with cults or cult-like activities?" I asked as we stepped onto the sidewalk.

"Not sure what you mean by cult-like activities."

"I have to spell it out for you?"

"Whoa there, Alex. I'm not naïve, but I didn't know if you meant the Jim Jones crap back in the 1980s or—"

"You mean the 1970s, at least when he moved his so-called Temple to Guyana, and then, as we all know, he brainwashed over nine hundred people into committing a mass murder-suicide. Over nine hundred frickin' people." I popped him on the arm, like I did with Nick.

He rubbed his arm. "You're pretty intense about all this."

"I did some initial research on my plane ride down from Boston. It reminded me of what one charming, persuasive man can do."

"Throwing around God's name probably helped his cause."

"That's my fear, Romano."

He grabbed the door handle and paused. "What exactly?"

"That my mom was brainwashed just like those poor, lost souls in Jonestown, Guyana."

He drew his lips into a straight line, then opened the door for me. Inside, the décor was subdued but high quality, starting with the marble flooring and wainscoting on the walls. There was an information center with a touch-screen kiosk in front of us, although no one was behind the expansive granite

countertop.

Looking to my left, I spotted the same woman from earlier speaking to a man wearing a white collar. He looked to be about my age, with thinning brown hair and a small tire for a waist.

“Hi there,” the woman said. “Are you looking to learn more about our church?” Her wide smile instantly formed a pair of parenthesis on either side of her mouth. She looked older up close.

“No, it’s not that.”

My sidekick pulled his badge off his belt loop and held it up. “Detective Romano.”

“Oh,” she said with a sour look on her face.

“I guess this is a professional visit.” The minister shook each of our hands. “They call me Pastor Jim. Donna and I want to help you as much as we can. But I can’t imagine why you’re even here.”

I said, “Would you like to take this conversation to your office, or at least out of this public area?”

The minister looked at Romano and then back at me. “We’re all alone, but do you also work with the police department?”

I got the impression he wasn’t going to be very open if I didn’t flash a badge, which made me think he had something to hide.

I held up a finger, then fished through my purse until I found my credentials. I held them up.

“FBI?” Pastor Jim let out a nervous chuckle, then put his hands in his pockets.

“Yes.”

“Why would you want to talk to us? We’re just a church doing God’s work.” He rocked back on his heels and kept smiling like we’d just caught him stealing candy.

“No worries,” I said. “We’re actually working a cold case, and we’re hoping you can help us with some historical data.”

“About this church?” the pastor asked.

“More about your members,” Romano interjected.

“Well, glory be to God,” Pastor Jim said, pointing to the ceiling or heaven. “Donna has been with the church for years and years. I, myself, have been the lead pastor for seven years now.”

I took in a deep breath before I continued. “This topic might be difficult, so I appreciate your consideration in advance.”

“Sure, any way I can help,” Donna said pleasantly.

“Do you have a record of all the people who served as deacons of the church?”

“Yes, we do,” she said.

“In fact,” Pastor Jim said while waving us to follow him, “we have a wall down this side hallway with a group photo from each year’s set of deacons. These men have been a tremendous help in leading this church into the

twenty-first century.”

He took a right and pointed up ahead where recessed lighting illuminated several framed photos. “I’d go as far as to say that I probably wouldn’t be here if these men had not given their lives to helping this church grow.”

I nodded politely and started looking for some type of chronological order to the dozens of photographs.

“Can I help you look for anyone in particular?” Donna stepped forward.

“Well, we don’t have a name, nor do we even have a picture. But we might have a year. We need to go back thirty-two years, to be specific.”

She started mouthing a few words while touching a finger to her opposite hand. “Okay, that would be in the upper right-hand corner here,” she said, rotating her arm near the wall. She stopped and turned to face me. “But it would certainly help if you could provide some context.”

I could feel Romano’s eyes on me.

“Agent Troutt, Detective Romano, I’m not a naïve little church girl. I realize people do bad things, even those who served as deacon of a growing nondenominational church in Virginia Beach.”

I could feel my shoulder relax a tad. “We’re looking for a man who might have left the church, maybe even hastily that year, right around November.”

She tilted her head. “Is that all you have to share?”

“He might have had some more, uh... extreme views than the rest of the congregation.”

“Extreme in what way?” the pastor asked, moving closer to Donna.

I pondered how to frame my description. “Honestly, we don’t have a lot of details. But I would say it’s probably someone who had strong opinions, might have wanted the church to be less inclusive, maybe to the point of separating from society.”

Donna blinked a couple of times, and her posture remained stiff while she fidgeted with her sunglasses.

“Is there something that you can tell us?”

She shifted her eyes to Pastor Jim, who pressed his lips together.

“Please. We...I really need to know everything you think could be relevant.”

“I was a little girl back then, but my older sister was involved in the church. Later, when I took on this role as lead administrator, she told me about a period of time in the church when...” She hesitated, glancing at the floor. “Oh, I don’t want this to get out to the public and reflect poorly on the church now. We’ve come so far.”

Pastor Jim touched her elbow with his hand. “I think we can trust them, Donna.” He nodded at her, and she continued.

“From what Laura told me, a couple of men were at the center of a movement that preached hatred for others. They were all about pointing out the differences in people and wanting us to segregate the church from the community. It went on for months, and after a while, it really began to tear the

congregation apart.”

She glanced down at her sunglasses.

“You said there were two men in the middle of this rebellion.”

She nodded.

“How did it all come to pass?”

“The pastor at the time resigned. I think there was a power struggle of some kind as to who would take over the church, but then, from what I recall, all of a sudden the men left, and calm returned.”

“Just like that?” I asked.

“It was quick, like yanking a bandage off a cut. That’s how my sister put it, anyway.”

“Your sister seems to know an awful lot. Does she live anywhere nearby so we could speak with her more?”

“She’s at home...sitting on my mantle.”

Pastor Jim clasped his hands in front of his black coat. “Laura passed away just over a year ago. We know she’s looking down on us at this very moment, right Donna?”

“Indeed. She’s my guardian angel.” She sniffled.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“Yes, my condolences,” Romano added.

After some small talk about the growth of the church under Pastor Jim’s leadership, Donna went to her office and brought back a sheet of paper with the names of the deacons from thirty-two years earlier, then put on her readers while she scanned the pictures on the wall.

With Romano looking over my shoulder, I began to scan the list. The names meant nothing to me. I handed the list to Romano, and said, “No one stands out, but we can run them through the database.”

As soon as I had a moment, I would take a picture of the names and send them on to Brad and Nick so they could cover more territory outside of the immediate coastal area.

“Something just hit me,” Donna said, stepping to within a couple of inches of one picture. Then she turned around while removing her readers. “A few of the parishioners left with the two men.”

“Voluntarily?”

She straightened her neck. “How else would they leave? Are you wondering if they were kidnapped?”

“We don’t know, but we’re looking for one person in particular.” I showed her the small photo of my mother.

She put on her readers and eyed the photo for a second, then flipped it over as she handed it back to me. “Charlotte Walsh. Doesn’t look familiar.”

“Well, when she went here, her name was Charlotte Troutt.”

“Your last name. Oh my, was she your—” Donna brought a hand to her mouth.

“My mother, yes.”

“You’re wondering if your mother is still alive,” Pastor Jim said.

I nodded. “Not getting my hopes up, but it’s important on many levels.”

Donna removed the frame from the wall. “This is it right here.” She unlatched the metal edges holding the cheap plastic frame together, then peeled a second copy of the photo out from behind the one facing the glass front. “I was right. Most of these photos had copies behind them.” She handed it to me.

“Thank you. This will be a lot of help. *You’ve* been a lot of help.”

Donna stepped forward and hugged me, catching me off guard. “I’ll be praying for you.”

And with that positive encouragement, we left.

Ensuring her head remained aimed at the man standing before the congregation, Beulah shifted her eyes to the side of the sanctuary where Ezra stood next to a closed door.

Ezra rarely if ever stood at the front of the sanctuary. Not unless he was about to read scripture. He held no Bible. She could see his thumbs moving nervously inside the palms of his clasped hands as he stared directly at the man who spoke.

He had no choice.

Ezra was a man and, as such, was granted special privileges to which women would never have access. But that didn't mean Ezra could ignore one of the core principles of Camp Israel: Malachi is a mouthpiece for the Lord in Heaven and therefore should be listened to with reverence and devotion.

While the deacons of Camp Israel only strategically used the term, Malachi was considered a prophet, one who had a unique and special relationship with his Maker unlike anyone in the group. On more than one occasion, he'd been compared to Moses...leading his flock to the promised land, if not a "pure" way of life.

A heavy book smacked against the wood floor, and her heart exploded in her chest.

*Had my head trembled?*

Holding her breath for a moment, she waited to see if one of the elders would appear at her side with a spiked ruler. She'd been subjected to the public flogging just once: two puncture wounds on the top her hand would always be a reminder to never take her eyes off Malachi when he was speaking from the pulpit—or at least never let them see you.

Tiny fingers dug into her arm. Shiloh, nestled up against her like a preschooler, was frightened. As the echo of the book dissipated into the arched ceiling above, all Beulah could hear was the panting breaths of Shiloh, the teenage girl who had been raped the night before and now still wore the ripped jacket, her prize for enduring such unrelenting pain.

"Do I have everyone's undivided attention?" Malachi spoke quietly while enunciating each word with precision, as if he were carefully carving out the souls of each person in the riveted congregation.

A creak from one of the pews behind Beulah. Someone had moved. Malachi's stare shot spears of disgust. After seconds that seemed like minutes, he gave a subtle nod. Boots immediately shuffled on the floor. Every instinct in Beulah's body told her to turn around and gawk at the unseemly sight of one of the sheep willingly exposing themselves to corporal punishment. But she knew she couldn't do it. No one could.

A moment later, she heard a thwack and then a pinched wail, followed by

shushing calls from those sitting near the “sinner,” as Malachi and the other elders would often say.

To her, it was another victim, the list too long to name each person at this point.

Beulah’s lungs released a pocket of air, allowing her shoulders to relax a tad. She subtly tapped Shiloh on the knee to let her know she wasn’t alone. Beulah had grown to be a trusted source of strength for many of the women in the camp, especially the kids. It was the least she could do, considering what she had left behind...what she had given up.

Gazing across the crowd, Malachi evoked a combination of fear and respect from most of the people sitting in the wooden pews. He arched his back to provide a larger than life presence. She knew he worked out repeatedly. But she always wondered the purpose behind it: to try to outlive any other human on earth, or to make himself more alluring to the females in the group? The ones who had become so immersed in the so-called mission of the group that they saw Malachi as more of a god than a flawed individual.

But she knew firsthand that his imperfections were not only disturbing; they were abhorrent and even criminal.

But not in Camp Israel. Not by Malachi’s rules.

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the demons.” Holding the Bible above his head, Malachi again spoke with passion and power. “You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”

“Amen,” someone yelled from the back.

The creases of Malachi’s lips slowly turned up at the corners. The sheep continued to drink from his cup of overflowing bullshit.

He flipped the pages of his book and lowered his head for a moment. Then he turned and nodded at Ezra, who quickly opened the side door. Beulah could see Jamin, Malachi’s second-in-command, standing at the doorway just behind a girl.

The girl was Jaala, the one who had created the disturbance in the back of the truck. Her face was ashen as she gazed upon the crowd staring back at her. Then, as if a boulder of ridicule and shame had been hurled upon her, she dropped her chin to her chest. Her head rocked a couple of times.

Was she crying? Oh God...don’t cry. Don’t crumble from the pressure. Beulah had seen in the past that this type of response drew even more scorn from those in power.

Ezra extended an arm toward the stairs leading to the pulpit. She hesitated, then took one step at a time, as if she were walking down the aisle about to be married. The happiest day of her life.

But Beulah knew there was a chance this could be the worst day of her young life.

As Jaala slowly progressed across the floor, Beulah’s gaze shifted back to the doorway. It was dark, but she could see the slumped outline of Jamin. He opened his mouth and smiled, his teeth seeming to glow. She recalled his

prominent incisors—the fangs of a vampire.

The voice of Malachi roared once again as Jaala knelt on the bottom step, Ezra hovering a few feet away.

“Whoever will not observe the law of God, the law of the King, let judgment be executed upon him strictly.” Malachi waltzed from the pulpit, his oratorical skills on full throttle. “I cannot make this up. This is what the Good Book says. I am only the messenger.”

He paused again, as if he enjoyed toying with the emotions of the crowd, and especially that of the girl, Jaala.

“And it goes on to say, ‘Whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment’.” He practically spit out the last syllable while casting a demonic gaze upon Jaala.

Beulah couldn’t imagine that Jaala’s outburst would incite such a public display of punishment. She must have taken it to another level once Ezra had carried her into the main building. Or was this another excuse just to make an example out of her? To scare anyone thinking about trying to leave back into a submissive, mindless sheep.

“It says here that a rebellious man seeks only evil, hears only evil, lives only evil. Can we accept evil in the house of the Lord?” he roared.

Beulah could feel the thump of her pulse against her neck, but it wasn’t his threatening tone that elicited such a physical reaction deep inside her. It was the thought that she had been the lone example of someone who had committed the ultimate rebellious act—escaping from the compound—yet her life had been spared. To this day, she wasn’t exactly sure why. She’d only been thankful to breathe each day, to accept the humble gifts of life, despite the obvious restrictions.

“Who am I to lay judgment on this girl for her sins? Who am I?” he asked the crowd.

No one dared respond.

He closed the book and brought it to his chest. “We, as a group of her peers, will decide her fate. By a show of hands, who agrees that this young girl has committed an act against the sanctity of this church and of mankind? Please, don’t be shy.”

Hands lifted into the air like a wave surging toward the shoreline. Men, women, children of all ages. Even though Shiloh had been the recipient of Jaala’s outburst, Beulah knew that retribution was not part of her makeup. She was the last person to raise her hand.

“Yes...” Malachi said. “I see everyone in our family agrees.” He knelt, but still spoke down to Jaala. “Do you not see how you have let down your brethren?”

He peered back up at the crowd. Beulah and probably most everyone else wondered where this would lead, besides the public humiliation and the disintegration of another young soul.

Malachi lifted back up, walked to the pulpit, and set the Bible down. He



then pulled off his coat and rested it across the lectern, and then rolled up the sleeves on his shirt. He grabbed something from inside the lectern and walked over to the top of the stairs. Looking straight down on Jaala, he removed a leather whip from its sheath.

“Oh...no,” Beulah whispered, and then she could feel the tug on her sleeve from Shiloh. She quickly calmed herself and then took hold of Shiloh’s knee.

“Be not deceived....” Malachi snapped his wrist, and the whip cracked against the floor a few feet from Jaala. She flinched, but refused to look at him.

“God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

A few seconds of silence.

Finally, almost mercifully, Malachi spoke. “Ezra, please proceed with the punishment phase.”

Ezra produced a hunting knife and leaned down to Jaala. He grabbed a handful of her dress off her back and ripped a hole with his knife. She struggled a bit, but he put one of his big paws on her shoulder, and she quickly ceased any movement. Her face went blank. She had lost her will to fight back.

Ezra ripped her dress apart and tossed most of it to the side, leaving the girl with nothing more than a small piece of fabric to press against her front as she curled up on the steps.

Malachi set his legs shoulder-width apart, the whip resting at his side like a sword.

“You will leave this world, as you entered it. From this point forward, you will not be called your church-given name; instead, you will only be referred to as Amber Harrington. You have been stripped of your worldly possessions. And now you will be stripped of your demonic soul.”

He raised his whip, his face etched with fury, and thrust his arm downward. The crack of the whip bit into Amber’s back as the young girl screamed out in pain. Red marks were already visible across her back.

Feeling the end of the leather whip with his opposite hand, Malachi seemed to draw more energy. This time, he turned his shoulders, lowering his center of gravity. Just as he was about uncork another lash, a voice cried out. “Stop, I beg of you.”

Malachi’s arm halted its trajectory before the whip connected with the unprotected girl.

“Please don’t do this!”

A woman raced up the center aisle, her dress flapping against her legs as she raced by Beulah. It was Jaala/Amber’s mother, Hodiah. It was obvious she couldn’t take watching her daughter beaten like an animal.

Gasps were heard around the sanctuary as elders scrambled and Ezra looked to his leader.

“If you believe there is any goodness in this world at all, you will stop this senseless attack on my daughter,” Hodiah screamed, moving closer.

Leaning forward in the pew, Beulah gripped the side railing, her heart stuck in the back of her throat. Glancing around, the elders began to converge on the center of the front part of the sanctuary, heads still turning. Members of the crowd pointed and a few cowered in their seats. Everyone was in shock that a member of Camp Israel would brazenly challenge Malachi, especially when he was in the middle of levying discipline.

Beulah watched Malachi’s jaw clench—she’d seen it up close too many times to count. Suddenly, Jamin walked past a stunned Ezra, reaching the stairs at the same time as Hodiah.

“Please...” she cried uncontrollably, “I’ll do anything for you to stop hurting my child. Please...I beg of you.”

Hodiah threw herself forward, trying to reach her daughter. Jamin shifted toward her, and she plowed into his body. He lost his balance momentarily and almost fell onto Amber. With Ezra standing there as if he were growing roots and Malachi still clutching the whip, Jamin pushed the mother back. She tumbled backward, falling on her backside just at the feet of the people sitting in the front row. A woman reached a hand down, but her husband took hold of her wrist, scooped up his child, and quickly slid down the pew away from Hodiah.

“Will...will you help save my child from being mauled by this fucking beast?” She reached up and touched the pew, but no one moved to help her. Beulah dug her fingernails into the railing, desperate to help, but also realizing it was a lost cause. Malachi always won. That was how the entire structure of the camp was set up. There was one supreme being amongst them, or so they were told.

Hodiah’s desperate pleas didn’t end. “That’s all he is, a manipulative, disgusting rapist.” Scanning the stunned congregation further, she pulled up to her knees. “None of you will do a fucking thing. You’re no better than he is!” Her voice reverberated off the high ceiling as she jabbed a finger toward Malachi. “Well, I’m not going to sit here like an obedient dog and follow his every whim and command while my daughter is raped and beaten.” She flipped to look over her shoulder, then picked up a hymnal off the pew and charged toward Malachi as her cry pierced Beulah’s ears.

Jamin quickly pulled something out of his pocket and raised his arm.  
A pistol.

The gun fired, exploding in Hodiah’s face. She crumbled downward, and what was left of her head smacked hard off the floor.

A quick moment of silence—no screaming or yelling, no gunshots. It was quickly replaced by a whimper, maybe two from the crowd.

Amber ran over and fell to her mother’s side. “Oh dear God...please don’t. Please don’t take my mother away from me,” she said, barely able to get words out.

Beulah looked down. Shiloh had covered both ears and buried her head in Beulah's lap.

A single tear trailed down Beulah's cheek. She wiped it away and wondered how much more she could take.

Pausing at the corner with a few other folks waiting for the pedestrian walk signal to turn green, I gazed across the unimpressive skyline in Hopewell—where my mother had last been seen more than thirty years earlier.

I counted five distinct smokestacks. The billows of filth towered into the atmosphere at a methodical pace, as if the polluted haze would linger for years and years.

A toddler cried in his mother's arms, which brought my gaze back around to the street as a truck roared by, minus its muffler. Gray puffs of smoke caused an older lady to start coughing, and the toddler wailed even louder. He had snot crusted just under his nose and generally seemed to be in a crappy mood.

I was right there with him.

I was zero-for-two in the brief time I'd spent in the city that Romano had described as having "the highest violent crime rate in the state." He went on to say that numerous companies that owned plants in the area were in litigation involving their environmental practices, which only led to more layoffs. High unemployment, high crime, and shitty water and air. Not sure why people hung around a place like this for very long, but maybe they saw hope somewhere at the horizon.

My first strikeout was at the local police department. The cop who had reached out to Romano's father so many years ago had passed away more than a dozen years earlier, and no one else knew a thing about my mother or the cold-case investigation into her whereabouts. And they had no interest in going there, despite my overaggressive attempts to light a fire under someone, anyone wearing blue.

I looked back to the gas station half a block down on Main and shook my head—that was my second failed stop in the land of Hopewell. The manager, a fella named Tyrone with a wicked goatee, had played me. When we talked on the phone the previous evening, he said he'd worked at the station under three different companies for over three decades, and if anything noteworthy had taken place, even if he hadn't personally witnessed it, he would know about it. I was skeptical, but hopeful. Looking back on it, too much so.

Before he would answer a single question, he insisted I fill my car with gas. After I performed that task, he then said he wasn't allowed to answer questions by law enforcement officials unless there was a warrant, a life was in imminent danger, or he had the approval of his district manager. It took ten minutes to convince him that my mom's life was in danger, and then when he finally relented, he had no recollection of the incident—when one of the clerks had spotted my mom and then discussed her and the man with the local cop.

I pulled out a pack of gum that Tyrone had convinced me to purchase and noticed it was already partially torn open. I walked over and threw it in the trash just as the other pedestrians got the signal to cross the intersection. Turning back around, my eyes spotted a red and gold sign on my side of the street that read Hank's Bar. The H was blinking gold. Even though it was still midafternoon, I had nothing to lose by going inside and asking a few questions.

The place was dark with music playing from hidden speakers. It was a Prince tune, "Purple Rain." Four men, all wearing caps, hovered over drinks at the bar; a few others were playing pool by the restroom sign. Without a noticeable window in the place, it could have been midnight and no one would have noticed.

It was Las Vegas, minus the glitz and glamour.

I found a seat on a barstool and immediately felt it wobble. I was about to stand up and change seats when...

"They're all like that." A woman around my age with spiked hair and a ring piercing her eyebrow flipped a napkin in front of me.

"Oh, okay," I said, inadvertently shifting my weight and then feeling the stool teeter on two legs before the third leg clanged to the hard floor. My teeth actually rattled.

"You'll get used to it if you stay long enough."

That wasn't my intention, but I kept my thoughts to myself.

"What'll you have?" She had two arms anchored on the bar.

"Uh..." I was distracted by a painful squeal. I looked to my right, where a man wheezed as if his air passage had been almost completely restricted.

"Don't mind Orlando. He's down one lung and one kidney, but he just keeps doing his thing."

I gave a slow nod as she leaned in closer. "Now it might do him some good to lay off the cigs, but he won't listen to me, or even his wife."

"I'll just have an ice water if you don't mind."

She chuckled. "One of them, are you?" She pulled a glass off a shelf and scooped ice into it.

"It's just a little early for me."

"You're new to town." She placed the ice water on my napkin. I picked it up and took a generous gulp, then I glanced down at my outfit. Blue and white striped shirt, khakis, flats and an overcoat—every article of clothing was wrinkled. "I guess it shows, huh?"

"That and I know everyone, or at least I've heard of everyone."

I took another glance around. A few eyes looked my way, and they weren't pleasant or engaging. I hoped I had an ally here with...

"I'm Alex, by the way. And your name is...?"

"Real name is Henrietta, but they call me Hank."

"Oh, so you're the owner?"

"It was my dad's place, but he passed and left me this wonderful

establishment in his will. A real jewel, don't you think?" She wasn't joking.

"Uh, yeah. Has great potential."

She smacked her hand on the bar and cackled. "I had you going there, Alex. I know it's a dump, but it pays my bills, most months anyway." A person with a prominent gold tooth asked for another beer, and Hank walked to the other corner of the L-shaped bar.

Hoping concrete data had come back on one of the elders in the church photo, I checked my phone to see if I'd missed a text or call from Brad or Nick. No such luck. It had been less than twenty-four hours since I'd sent the information to them, so it wasn't surprising. But I felt an urgency on this case unlike any other in my career—perhaps because this had nothing to do with my career. Mom's brief appearance in my early life had shaped whom I'd become, for better and for worse. Finding her alive would... Frankly, I couldn't predict the feeling inside. Excitement, anxiety, maybe a little bit of resentment. Dad's theory of her running off with a fanatical cult leader sounded more plausible with each step I took, but that still didn't mean she was alive. And if she was, she could be in Siberia by now, not just off the James River in Virginia.

I sipped my water, thinking. Then Hank was standing in front of me again. "Just passing through town?"

"Yeah, although I'm not sure where I'm going next."

She turned her head. "Maybe you want to make your way up to Richmond, or head for the coast?"

I pursed my lips. "Not sure. It's complicated."

"You look like one of those federal regulation people. Are you?"

"EPA? Uh, no."

"One of those acronyms."

"Well..." I debated giving her my full MO. Again, what did I have to lose? "I'm with the FBI, and I'm working a cold case."

"Ah, that's why you're here. Who was murdered?"

A couple of heads turned our way. I assumed they'd overheard Hank. I swiveled in my chair so my back was to them. "No one, I hope," I said to Hank. The eye below her pierced brow twitched ever so slightly, and I wondered what had changed.

She nodded, but then stopped talking. She picked up a bar towel and started drying glasses. Something was off. She seemed like the kind of person who could talk to a wall, and now she had clammed up.

I rummaged through my purse and pulled out the two photos that were now as important as my Glock. Well, maybe tied for second.

"This is why I'm in Hopewell," I said, placing the photos on the bar.

She gave them a passing glance and continued her chore.

"Did you get a good look, especially of this group photo? Wanted to see if you recognized any of the men in that photo." I knew it was a long shot, especially with the photo being so old.

She leaned down and picked up some loose napkins, tossed them in the trash. She appeared to run her eyes across the pictures one more time and went back to drying more glasses.

"Hank, what's going on? One minute you're interested in what I'm doing here, the next you couldn't care less."

She mumbled something as she turned to hang a glass off a rack above her head.

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing," she said matter-of-factly.

Subtly, I brought my armpit to my nose. I'd taken off from Virginia Beach earlier in the morning without taking a shower. I smelled BO all right, but it wasn't mine. It must have been the combination of ten other guys in this watering shithole.

"Do you have something against the FBI?"

A couple of glasses dinged.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that," I said, turning up my volume just a bit. She flipped back around, and her eyes scanned the crowd. "I didn't say that." Her cheeks had turned pink.

"Then why can't you look at the pictures?"

A quick roll of the eyes, which gave me a nice reminder of my daughter, Erin. "Okay, I'll take a look." She picked up the group photo and scanned it, then set it on the bar. "This picture must be twenty, thirty years old?"

I nodded.

Hank tossed the photo on the bar. "What do you want me to tell you? That one of those guys had a beer in my bar last weekend and he told me where he lives? Shit, woman."

Now I was just a "woman." I drank some of my water, just to ensure I wouldn't fire back my own zinger. "I'd be surprised if you've ever seen or heard of the people I'm searching for...hell, I don't even know which of these men I'm looking for, but I guess I just wanted to pick your brain."

I reached for the group photo at the same time Hank picked up the smaller photo of Mom. She stared at it for a moment, then shifted her eyes to me.

"You're related to her."

I nodded.

"Says her name is Charlotte Walsh. So you're Alex Walsh."

I smiled. "Not exactly. That's her maiden name. You're looking at a picture of my mom from probably forty or forty-five years ago."

"She reminds me of Judy Garland...before she was messed up," she said with a smirk.

"Thanks."

She held on to the photo and then curled her lip inward. "So you said you're looking for a couple of people. Does that include your mom?"

I released a breath while holding out my hand for the photo. "Yep." I placed the photo back in my purse.

“Mind if I ask why you’re using such an old photo of her?”

“It’s the only one I’ve got.”

She cleared her throat and looked both ways before continuing. “How long has she been missing?”

“Over thirty years.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“It’s a long story.”

“Well, I’m listening now. Again,” she said with a wide grin.

I gave her the background on my mom’s odd behavior and how I’d thought she had died in a car crash three decades earlier.

“And then three days ago I helped catch a guy who had murdered his wife and the Boston police chief. That’s when the history of my life took a dramatic turn.”

Hank had two elbows on the bar as I explained how Douglass Butterfield unloaded every bit of guilt that had plagued him his entire life—including the hit-and-run in which he’d evaded arrest. I finished the story of how my mom walked out of the hospital, and Dad’s subsequent cover-up, my stopover in Virginia Beach, and how I ended up in Hopewell.

“You’ve come a long way, and I’m sure you still have a ways to go,” she said.

“I left my family back in Boston to find her, or at least to finally figure out what had really happened to her. This is important. And for some reason, my gut is telling me I don’t have much time. Then again, that could just be the younger Alex talking...the one who missed out on all of those mother-daughter moments.”

Hank wiped a tear off her face.

“Didn’t know that would create such an emotional reaction.” I felt a surge in my own emotions, and I reached for a napkin.

“It’s not...that.”

Did she know something? “What is it, Hank?”

“Oh, dammit, I’m not sure I can trust you.”

“Is it because I work for the federal government? If so, don’t worry. I’m one of the biggest rebels they employ. But they put up with me because I’m damn good at what I do.”

She blinked a couple of times, as if she were trying to better read me and my intentions.

“What is it, Hank?”

Just then, the guy to my right released another wheezing breath. “I’m out of here, Hank. Here’s my six bucks. If it’s not enough, put it on my tab.” He tossed his cash on the bar and pushed out of his barstool.

“Thanks, Monta.” She pocketed the cash and cleaned up his empty before returning to our space. With Monta gone, there wasn’t another person within fifteen feet of us.

Hank moved closer. “You seem like an honest person.”



"Is that a question or a statement?"

"I guess that's my way of saying that I feel like I can trust you."

I had no idea why she needed such undivided loyalty, but I wasn't going to argue the point.

"Something's bothering you, Hank. Tell me what's wrong."

"Actually, now life is...okay, all things considering."

She seemed to sense my confusion, and she extended her hand. "It's my sister, Claudia. She, uh..."

Her eyes bubbled with tears.

"What's got you so worked up? Is your sister safe?"

"I've made sure of it. They'll never find her again."

My pulse clocked faster. "Who are they?"

"Those fuckers who run that religious cult, Camp Israel."

"Your sister was recruited into this...group?"

"It wasn't a fucking group. It was a goddamn cult. Psychological abuse, sexual abuse, brainwashing with all of their manipulative tactics. It was the poster child for fanatics in this country. Hell, they put the Taliban to shame."

She was fuming by the time she stopped talking. But my breathing cadence almost matched hers.

I managed to keep my voice low. "You're saying that your sister, Claudia, used to be part of some cult named Camp Israel?"

"Yes. She was gone for almost two years."

"How did it work?"

"Someone she met online. Seemed like a nice guy. Over time, they started talking about some powerful things, like life after death and sacrificing yourself for others. Claudia always had a good heart, so it was easy for her to go there. Too easy."

Oxygen flooded my brain, and I tried like hell to not make ten leaps of assumptions.

"But Claudia is in a good place, and safe?"

"I've made sure of it."

"Do you think they'd be looking for her?"

"After she escaped, they came around looking for her. Of course, to most people they just looked like your hardworking Americans. Farmers, with so-called American values. Whatever those are."

I realized my palms were sweating, and I wiped them on my pants. "Did you turn them over to the authorities?"

She flashed her teeth, but it wasn't a smile. She was biting her tongue.

"What am I missing?"

"The Feds...you guys."

I put a hand to my chest. "The FBI?"

"Yeah, them and every other agency. They didn't do shit when I told them Claudia had been brainwashed and led away by these crazy people."

"Nothing?"

“They talked a lot at first. Made a lot of promises. But it went nowhere, and they moved so slowly it would have taken them thirty years to find her, let alone have the balls to rescue her.”

I strummed my fingers on the bar, wondering if there was any way this could be the same group.

“Look, I can’t tell you why the FBI didn’t pursue your sister’s disappearance more diligently. Although...I will say this. Ever since the Branch Davidian debacle down in Waco, Texas, several years back, higher-ranking people in the FBI do everything possible to not box in a group of people who seem desperate. No one wants to see another mass killing or suicide.”

She brought a hand to her mouth, as if she were trying to hold back something from escaping, literally.

“What is it, Hank?”

“I can’t. I’ve said enough.”

“Actually, I was going to ask you if I could speak with Claudia.”

She pressed her eyes closed for a moment. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take the risk.”

“Hank, you just spoke about the horrible things these people at Camp Israel did to your sister.”

“I know, I know. I couldn’t help myself. I should have just kept my mouth shut.”

“Do you want this to happen to another girl? How many more will be brainwashed, brought into this camp and never allowed to leave?”

She started shaking her head. “I...I don’t know. But I just can’t let Claudia be exposed to this shit again. It will destroy her and, at the same time, open up the possibility that they could find her. And if they do, they’ll make her pay for escaping, believe me. She told me how they punish and humiliate those who defy their leaders.” She smacked her hand over her mouth again. “I’ve got to stop.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to Claudia. I won’t let anyone near her.”

She looked down at the bar, or maybe at nothing at all, and her face became stiff with anxiety.

“Hank, we have no idea if my mom is still alive, but if she is and if she’s being held against her will in this camp, would you be able to live with yourself?”

She kept her gaze on the bar.

“All I need is a few minutes. We need names...of the leaders and where this Camp Israel is located. In fact, if you want to ask her, you can even relay it back to me.”

“Hey, Hank, what does a guy have to do to get a beer over here?” A man on the opposite side of the bar wagged an empty beer bottle.

Turning on her heels, she walked over and gave the guy another beer. She quickly scanned the other customers to see if they needed a refill. I felt a buzz

in my purse as she walked back over, but I chose to not look at my phone for now.

“Have you had a chance to think it over?”

She nodded while licking her lips. “Claudia is the only sister I have. She trusts me, and I can’t do anything to betray that trust. I’m sorry, Alex, but I just can’t help you.”

Tears flooded her face. She walked out the side of the bar and then jogged toward a back office door.

I sat in stunned silence for a moment, wondering if the best chance to find my mother had just fallen through my fingers.

“Ma’am, can you get me another beer? I’m thirsty as hell, and Hank has disappeared.” An older man with scruff that looked like worn sandpaper set his empty beer bottle just to my right. He stood there with a pool stick in one hand.

I grabbed a napkin and wrote a note to Hank on it, folded it three times, and then took a twenty from my wallet. “If you promise to give this note to Hank, I’ll let you keep this twenty. Deal?”

He scratched his whiskers and stared at the cash as if it had magical powers. “Sure thing, lady. You can trust me.”

I walked out of Hank’s Bar hoping for the best, but wondering if there was any trust left in Hopewell.

“Give me ten bucks and I’ll wash yo car. It’ll be the best wash you’ll ever see. Try me.”

A man with his flat-billed Raiders cap half-cocked to the side hunched near the open window of my rental car. Why he’d decided to stop at my car and bother me, I had no idea. Perhaps I had “outsider” etched on my windshield and my forehead. All I wanted him to do was leave me alone. I’d found an inconspicuous spot near a dumpster and a bunch of overgrown weeds in the parking lot of a laundromat across the street from Hank’s Bar. While I awaited a call back from Brad and Nick, I couldn’t help but exercise my curiosity. Would Hank lead me to her sister, or was her sibling living south of the border, or hundreds of miles in the other direction? That was my sole focus, at least until this guy had walked up and rapped on my window until I rolled it down.

He brushed his snotty nose with the palm of his hand, then stuck both hands in the pockets of his Raiders windbreaker that looked like it had been washed with bleach.

“Sorry. Not interested,” I said.

“I guess I should start by saying my name is Simon. Nice to meet you.”

“Okay. Thanks for the offer.” I wasn’t about to get into a conversation, so I pushed the button to roll up my window.

“Hold up, hold up,” he said, extending his hand in the window opening just before it got crushed.

“Yes, Simon?”

“I’m the best around. You can ask anyone.” He smiled.

“I don’t need a car wash though.”

He leaned back and looked up and down the dusty Camry. “Not from what I see.”

“Well, you don’t look like you’ve got all the gear to wash my car anyway—not from what I see.”

A quick grin crossed his face, exposing a full set of teeth as white as rice.

“Oh, that’s your concern?”

I kept a straight face.

“You haven’t seen Simon in action, yet. Just watch.” He pulled out his phone, tapped the screen a couple of times and talked into the receiver with his back half-turned.

I heard something along the lines of, “Yo, peep,” and then, “We’ve got a seven-sixty-nine.” And finally, “Fine piece of ass,” he murmured.

“Excuse me!” I said.

He pocketed the phone. “Hey, no worries. Me and my peep were talking about hitting Crossroads later where all the little lovelies hang out.”

“Great,” I said with little enthusiasm.

“So any minute now my team is going to roll up in a white van. They’ll be all over this car in no time. We’ll have it cleaner than the Queen’s ass in ten minutes flat.”

“Simon, I’m not interested,” I said with a direct tone, my eyes not leaving his.

“But...” he splayed his arms from his side, “everyone always does what Simon says.”

I let him see the whites of my eyes. “Seriously?”

He grinned again. “You got ten dollars I can borrow for a little spending money at Crossroads?”

I felt some change in my overcoat pocket. “Here’s six bucks and thirty-eight cents. Now can you just leave me alone?”

He took the money and tipped the bridge of his cap. “Why are you acting like you’re on some type of freak-out Mission Impossible shit?”

“Simon, it’s called a stakeout. And I’m just chillin’ a bit before I hit the road again.”

“I had a feeling you were from out of town,” he said, wagging a finger.

“That’s right. I’ve got two dead bodies in the trunk of my car right now. You want to be the third?”

He stumbled backward, running into the garbage bin with an echoing thud. “Simon says you’re a whacked-out bitch. I’m getting the hell out of here.”

“Later, Simon Says.” I rolled up my window and watched the scammer run off.

With my gaze refocused on the bar across the street, I peeled the wrapper off my Snickers and took a big bite. A gooey line of caramel stuck to my chin.

“Crap,” I said to myself, trying to wipe it off with a thin napkin.

I cracked the top of my bottled water and tipped my head back. It cooled the inside of my chest on the way down. Without taking my eyes off the bar, I pulled out my phone and brought it to eye level. No new messages or texts, and it still had eighty percent battery life.

Just as I set it on the center console, it rang so loud it hurt my ears. It slipped through my fingers, falling to the floorboard.

“Hello...hello, this is Alex,” I said, fumbling with my grip as I brought the phone to my ear.

“Hey, sexy.”

I choked on my candy bar. “Brad?” My voice sounded like a pubescent boy’s.

I heard Brad chuckling as I chugged another mouthful of water.

“Did I choke you up, babe?”

I finally released a breath. “Don’t you always?” I said with a smile. “I guess Nick isn’t on?”

“He’s grabbing a fruit smoothie and will be in the conference room in a

minute. Wait... Here he is."

"Have you told her?" Nick asked, apparently directing the question to Brad.

"Tell me what?"

"The picture and the list from the church. Data is coming back on the eight guys."

I sat up higher in my seat.

"Haven't had the chance to say anything yet," Brad said.

Papers shuffled in the background, along with a slurping sound.

"I've got news to share on my end as well."

"You found hope in Hopewell?" Nick asked. "Sorry about the bad pun."

"Very little hope it seems, but a piece of data that might be huge, or it could turn out to be a dead end. No in-between."

More rustling of papers on the other end of the line. "Having a tough time staying organized?" I asked.

"Eh, not having Gretchen involved doesn't help. She's like a research machine," Nick said. "Remember, we're trying to do this on top of our day jobs."

"Alex," Brad said, "we're doing fine, so don't worry about us. Right, Nick?"

"Yeah, we're good. Anyway, back to the data on the big eight, or really nine, depending on how you look at it."

"I'm not following you." I said.

"Eight faces in the picture, but nine names on the list. Two were listed on one line," Brad said.

"I never noticed. But from best we can narrow down, number nine—the man with no face, Monroe Namath—traveled out to the West Coast, moved in with his daughter, and tended to his garden until he died eight years ago. So I think it's safe to cross him off the list of being involved, at least current day, in any type of religious cult."

I bit off another piece of my Snickers as I watched a man exit Hank's Bar. It was the old guy to whom I'd given the note. He dipped his cap into the stiff wind and walked up the sidewalk and around the corner.

"Are there any hits with any of the remaining eight men?"

"We think so," Nick said. "Although the trail gets cold at some point."

Brad added, "Now, on three of the eight, the trail is pretty easy to follow. They died within two years of when this photo was taken."

"How?" I shot back.

"Oh, you're already jumping to a conspiracy angle," Nick said. "No such luck on these three. They each died of natural causes: one was a heart attack, then there was one with an aneurism, and..."

"I've got it here," Brad said. "It's ugly, the third one died from being mauled by a pit bull while walking in his neighborhood."

"Not a good way to go," I said, picking caramel goo from my teeth. Then

I drank more water as I watched two women enter Hank's Bar. They had on waitress uniforms, as if they might have just gotten off a shift at Waffle House or Denny's.

"That leaves us with five names," Nick said. "Two appear to have lived normal lives. One went into insurance sales and retired in the last five years. He lives in Nebraska with his wife. Goes to church every week, plays golf with the same three friends. Part of the Rotary Club. Lives a pretty normal existence.

"The second of the two actually became a horse breeder in Kentucky. Worked a farm for several years. Got divorced, then remarried, and even though he's approaching seventy, he's got kids in their teens."

"Ah, he won the trophy wife," I said.

"Not if you saw the picture," Nick said. "I think she might have more fingers than teeth. From the pictures we found online of their wedding and at a horse race, she smiles a lot, so maybe she's a happy person."

I smiled. "There's someone for everybody, right?"

"Or more than one person, if your name is Waylon Sigler."

"What do you mean?"

"He's one of the three remaining people on the list. Apparently, he moved to Utah and tried to marry a woman."

"And the problem with that is...?"

"He was fifty-three; she was just eighteen."

I'd just taken another bite of the candy bar. "What the hell?"

"What are you eating?" Nick asked.

"A healthy candy bar. Don't say a word, Nick Radowski. You used to eat like shit too. It's all I had time to grab at this rundown gas station. The one where Mom was last seen."

That took us on a tangent, and I quickly explained the lack of anything turning up at the gas station. "So back to the old fart marrying the teenager. It's perverted, but probably legal."

"It would have been," Brad said, "if he hadn't been married already."

"Okay, so he's a double pervert. What else do you have on Mr. Sigler?"

Brad continued. "It's intriguing. He moved to North Carolina and started his own ministry. Lives in a small town, even has a little church. Has a farm, and it appears that another couple lives with him and his wife. Some of his views seem to be out there."

"Like what?"

"He's espousing the end of the world will take place in less than five years, and everyone must repent before the rapture. He's quoted in an article in the town newspaper saying that Jesus could come back to earth in the form of anyone...including a doctor, a teacher, or even a plumber."

"A plumber. Butt crack and all," I said, laughing at myself before the guys joined in.

I watched the sun fall behind the bar. A glowing purple began to seep

across the darkening sky as I thought about the information on Wayne Sigler. “Did either of you see any references to a thing called Camp Israel during your research on Sigler, or even the other two?”

A moment of silence. “Sorry, we were just staring at each other shaking our heads,” Nick said. “We can go back and look for that specifically though. Is that the big news you had to share?”

“It’s why I’m doing surveillance just across the street from Hank’s Bar, yes.”

I began to summarize my conversation with Hank. Just as I mentioned Claudia’s name, Brad said, “Hold on, Alex. Hey, Gretchen.”

She must have walked into the conference room.

“Why are you guys hiding away in here?” Her voice sounded like she was moving closer to the speakerphone.

“It’s nothing,” Nick said.

“Didn’t I hear Alex on the line? I thought she took a few days off to find information about her mother.”

“Hi, Gretchen.”

“Hey, Alex. Sorry I’m asking so many questions. I’m just...you know me. I’m curious.”

“Should we tell her?” Nick asked.

“Tell me. Please. I want to be in on the hunt.”

“Gretchen,” Brad said with a quiet, measured voice, “this is...let’s say off the books. We’re supporting Alex in the field with a little research here and there.”

“I get it. That’s right down my alley,” she said with excitement in her typically squeaky voice. “I want in.”

“Alex?” It was Nick.

“I’m good with it, but this has to be kept under wraps.”

“Awesome,” Gretchen said.

I could hear what sounded like a chair being scooted across the floor. “I just left another meeting, so I have my laptop with me.”

Nick quickly got Gretchen up to speed, and I could already hear her fingernails tapping the keyboard.

“So, Camp Israel...” she said. “What else do we need to look for?”

I gave them the rundown on what Hank had shared about her sister, Claudia.

“And she won’t let you to talk to Claudia?” Nick asked. “Dammit, doesn’t Hank understand she could be allowing other people to get hurt? I don’t get it.”

“It’s tough. I know she’s just being protective of her sister. Who wouldn’t be?” I said, although with no siblings of my own, I was making a guess on how she might feel. “But that’s why I’m sitting here watching the bar. I’m hoping she’ll lead me to her. Like I said earlier, though, who knows if my mom is or was connected to this Camp Israel? But we can’t drop any lead that



comes in right now. Which is why we also need to dig more on this Wayne Sigler guy in North Carolina.”

“Alex, have you thought about taking this hunt out of the shadows?” Nick said. “Claudia’s accusations would get any agency’s attention. You could reach out to the local FBI agency.”

“Sorry if I left that out, but Hank said the FBI didn’t get much done when her sister was missing for two years. It’s apparent she doesn’t trust them, which is one reason she doesn’t trust me. Well, I think she wants to trust me, but my FBI job hurts my credibility in her eyes.”

“Look, I’m more concerned that you’re out in the field all by yourself,” Brad said.

“Thanks, Brad, but I can handle it. I’m afraid if we go public with this, it’ll just create more of a bureaucratic smokescreen for us to fight through to make any headway on finding my mom, or finding out what happened to her.”

A few seconds of quiet. “It’s okay, guys. I don’t have my head in the sand. I realize it’s a possibility that Mom could have died years ago. We just know that she ran off with some religious fanatic. I’m preparing myself for the worst.”

“Dammit, Alex. I want to be there with you,” Brad said.

I thought about his offer. “I’m okay, really.”

“Okay, you two lovebirds,” Nick said. “If anyone is going to go, it’s me. I’m the obvious choice. I’m a field agent, and don’t forget, I’m your partner.”

“Thanks, Nick. And Brad, you know how much I want you here. But we can’t shut down the entire Boston FBI office just for my personal mission. And I doubt Jerry would approve the time off, especially with me already out of the office. Now fill me in on the last two elders from that picture.”

“Eldridge Kaufman and Dusty Holcomb. They look like Batman and the Penguin,” Nick said.

“What?” Brad jumped in.

“You know, one is tall, good looking, has a presence about him. That’s Kaufman. The short one, is a bit on the round side with hunched shoulders and dark circles under his eyes. That’s Holcomb.”

“Kaufman and Holcomb,” I said, thinking about the names. “Sounds like a law firm. And we all know what I think about attorneys.”

“No worries on that front. These two come from different worlds. Kaufman, who, in this old picture you sent us from the church, actually has blond, spiked hair. He was a former regional sales manager for a furniture chain. Appears he had some strong opinions. Wrote a couple of editorials in the local paper about maintaining a pure life.”

“What did he mean by pure?” I asked.

“He wasn’t specific, but it seemed like he was dancing real close to saying a pure race,” Nick said.

“Like Hitler,” I said.

“Maybe a Hitler with a splash of David Koresh,” Brad said. “He inserted

Bible verses at the oddest times, just to prove some oddball point. Honestly, it read like he was recruiting people to his cause, this new way of life.”

Nick chimed in with, “But there was nothing new or progressive about it. Women, it seems, are nothing more than scratching posts for men.”

“Fuck that!” Gretchen said. “Nothing personal, Nick.”

“I’m all good.”

I heard a chair squeak.

“Who is this asshole?” Gretchen asked.

“That’s the point of this investigation,” Nick said. “This Kaufman fella, or one of the other two guys, might have been the guy who drew Alex’s mom into hiding.”

My mind swirled with everything that had been said. Hitler, Koresh...it was too bizarre to understand. “There was one more on the list. Penguin, you called him.”

“Dusty Holcomb. Looks like a troll, but was quite the corporate politician. Had jobs at three of the Big Five accounting firms, moving as high as executive vice president,” Nick said.

“Sounds like a typical corporate junkie. All about the power and control,” I said.

“And the money. He raked it in, according to SEC reports,” Brad added.

“This is where it gets interesting.” Nick’s voice got louder, like he was leaning closer to the speakerphone. “A year after this photo was taken, Holcomb sold his house, liquidated a number of other assets—stocks, bonds, a boat—and moved to Ohio.”

I finished off the last of the candy bar as I waited for Nick to continue. All I heard was clicking and tapping on a laptop.

“Nick, are you still breathing?” A roaring cough nearly ruptured my eardrum. “What the...?”

“Sorry, my smoothie...ugghh!”

“He’s trying to say, Alex, that he choked on his fruit smoothie,” Brad said with a chuckle. “Now he’s wiping the beads of sweat off his red face. You okay, Nick?”

“Yes. Just got a little excited.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, Ohio is also the last place we can find any record of Kaufman.”

“What part?”

“Parkersburg, a city in southeast Ohio. The same city where Holcomb landed.”

I downed the last remaining water from the bottle, my eyes on Hank’s Bar, but my mind far from it. “Any further connections between the two?”

“Not on paper,” Brad said. “It’s strange how they both ended up in the same small city.”

“Too much to be a coincidence. But you said that’s where the trail grows cold.”

“Over twenty-five years cold. We’ve only been at this for a day, so we’re

bound to turn up more data—”

“We’ve only scratched the surface, Alex,” Gretchen said. “Now that I’m part of your covert op, if data exists, we’ll find it. Guaranteed.”

My, she sounded confident. And that was just what we needed. Then I heard a rippling noise.

Nick said, “Gretchen just popped her knuckles. World, look out.” We all laughed.

I felt more comfortable knowing Gretchen was involved, allowing Brad and Nick to spread around some of the work. And we had a good track record of working well as a team. “So, we have Sigler as more of a known entity down in North Carolina,” I said.

“Sure you don’t mean deity?” Nick joked.

I ignored his lame joke. “What part of North Carolina?”

“Small town just west of Winston-Salem called Boone,” Brad said.

“I’m struggling with this one. We need to dig deeper on all three men: Sigler, Holcomb, and Kaufman, but at the same time, I need help with this Camp Israel. I have this strange feeling from talking to Hank, which is why I’m...Hold on.”

Hank had just stepped out of the bar. “The bar owner is on the move, guys.” A moment later, she climbed into an older, tan, Ford SUV. “I’ll try to get her plate, just to establish residency.”

I cranked the engine, backed out of my hiding spot, and put the car in drive as Hank pulled away from the curb and headed east.

The moment my tires hit the main road, another call beeped in. I glanced down at my phone. Archie, my old running buddy from the CIA whom I’d called the day before. “Guys, gotta run. It’s a call I’ve been expecting.”

“No worries. We’ll split this up and get back to you ASAP,” Gretchen said.

“Be careful, Alex,” Brad said.

I executed a right turn, and followed the SUV from about a hundred yards back, three cars in between us. It appeared we were heading out of town. I tapped my phone to answer the call. “It’s about damn time, Archie. How have you been?”

No immediate response, although his phone sounded like it had been placed in a wind tunnel.

I pulled the phone away from my ear for a second. “Archie, where are you?”

The wind subsided, but now I heard voices, but not near the receiver.

“It’s okay, he’ll never know. Promise me. Scout’s honor.” It was Archie. He was talking to someone, his voice barely detectable. “Archie, this is Alex. I’m on the line. Do you even know you called me?”

A rustling sound.

“Archie?”

I maintained eye contact with Hank’s SUV. She took a right down a side

road and passed a few homes. Once I made it to the intersection, I waited a moment and then turned right. I made a slow turn and kept my distance. My theory about her heading out of town seemed wrong. Maybe her Claudia lived in one of these homes.

“But, Arch, I’m a good country girl. And country girls only do that…”

The woman’s rural twang dissipated. It was obvious I had interrupted something. Archie had butt-dialed me. I turned the phone so my voice was directed straight at the phone mic. “Archie, if you don’t pick up this fucking line, I’m going to hang up on you. And I was going to pay you for your services. Money!”

“Who is that?” the woman asked.

“What?” he said. “It’s just you and me in this barn, Felicia. Well, us and two goats, a horse, and that damn rooster that tried to take a snip at my—”

I quickly interjected on high volume, “No, no, no, no. Please don’t go there. You’re making me sick to my stomach.” Oblivious to my hell, Archie continued his sales pitch on the woman. “Okay, all you need to do is to emulate those two horses we watched out back, okay?”

“Emulate? Is that one of those fancy terms you learned when you were in veterinarian school?” she asked.

“Exactly. It’s very primal. Organic.”

“I like organic. What’s good for the environment, is good for my—”

“Please shut up!” I yelled into my phone. “Archie, dammit.”

The gal continued. “But what if George comes home? We may not have had sex for five years, but he’s got an awfully big gun.”

“Mine’s bigger, Felicia. Much bigger. Now come home to Daddy.”

Just then, a dog jumped into the road in front of me and a kid was two steps behind him. I slammed on my brakes and jabbed my free hand into the horn. The kid froze for a second, then waved at me and ran after his dog.

“Dammit.” I released a breath.

“What the hell, Arch? Your phone is on. Who is this?” the woman said into the phone.

I paused a second, and I spotted the back end of Hank’s SUV turning right onto another residential road up ahead. “This is Archie’s doctor,” I said. “Just wanted to let him know the test results came back. He’s got an STD.”

“What the fuck, Arch?”

Sounded like the phone was dropped. “That’s nothing, Felicia. Just some prankster. You don’t need to put your clothes back on.”

“Looks like you’ve lost your zest for me anyhow,” she said.

I heard a zipper sound.

“Seriously, Arch. I don’t know what I was thinking. I think this was a sign. You’ve got an STD, and I’ve got a jealous husband. So we better not do what those two horses were doing out back.”

“I swear to you on a stack of Bibles that I do not have an STD.”

“But that’s what your doctor just told me.”

I couldn't help but smile.

Archie got on the line. "Tell her, Alex. Tell her you're not my doctor."

"I'm not his doctor, I admit it."

"Oh really. Hmmm," she said.

"I'm actually his ex-girlfriend. And he gave me syphilis."

I heard a smack. "Ouch, that hurt," Archie whined.

"Don't come back here again, Arch. We'll find another vet to take care of our horses. I thought we had a connection, but I guess you're just like every other guy."

"Worse," I said.

"Hush, Alex. Please, Felicia, give me another chance."

"You got a better chance with one of those horses than you do with this country girl."

I heard what sounded like boots marching away.

"You there, lover boy?"

"Yes, I'm here," he said in a pouty voice.

"You let her wear her boots. How gentlemanly of you."

"Her feet are on the large side, kind of like her—"

"Please, no more. I can't take it."

"You asked."

"Actually, no I didn't. And frankly, you're going to force me back into therapy."

"You listened in," he said.

"You called." We sounded like a teenage brother and sister. "Let's move on. You got time to talk?"

"The only thing that got my attention was when I heard you say money. I always have time when money is involved."

I'd never heard Archie complain about money, certainly not since he'd gone solo and opened his own private investigation business.

Hank pulled into a parking lot and walked inside a pet store. I parked on the side of the building.

"You going to be around in an hour?" I asked.

"As long as I can't convince Felicia to come back to the barn."

"You're sick. I'll call you then. Answer the phone this time."

"If you're paying, I'll pick up even if Felicia and I are in the middle of it." He laughed.

I hung up and walked inside the pet store.

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Carrying two plastic bags full of canned cat food and two cat toys, Hank swung open the door to her bar and disappeared inside the dark edifice.

A cat inside a bar. I hadn't seen any evidence of a cat when I was inside. It could have been there, lurking under a pool table or huddled in a box in Hank's office. But a cat in a bar? My eyes were drawn again to the colorful,

wispy clouds lingering above the building. As I studied closer, the bricks changed color along the top. I stepped off the curb and crossed the street, my eyes moving beyond the bar toward the back. I stopped at an alley and realized there was another building behind the bar. From my vantage point at the end of the alley, I could see a number of broken windowpanes and graffiti scrawled across the chipped paint of the bricks. The place looked abandoned.

Moving at a faster clip, I walked south half a block and then turned down the street to face the front of the building. An old, warped sign at the top of the building: *Hopewell Drugstore*.

It was completely dark inside. Two metal-framed doors were chained shut. Smears of white shoe polish were on one large window, saying “50% off at Big A’s Bakery” with a large arrow pointed westward. The building looked like it hadn’t seen a tenant in years.

A dog howled off in the distance. Or was that a coyote? I did a quick spin on one foot. No sign of any creature, four-legged or two. As I shoved my hands in my coat pockets and retraced my steps, a flash of light caught my eye.

I glanced up at the same abandoned building. I blinked a couple of times, wondering if I’d been distracted by a shooting star or a lightning bug. There was a single window on what looked like a third floor. I moved two steps closer. It was dark, just like the other windows. I stared it down for a good minute.

There it was.

I spotted a crack of light in the middle of the window, as if someone was peering between two pitch-black curtains. I felt my heart thumping against my chest wall, and I made a beeline for the front door. Pulling on the metal handles, they rattled some, but it was obvious the chains were secure. No one had walked into the building through that entrance.

I stepped back from the front door and glanced up at the darkened window. A couple of black birds sailed overhead. Another minute of staring and no sign of light or life. I hoofed it down the street and made my way around to the back alley. The clicking of my flats reverberated off the brick walls as I moved down the alley. About a hundred feet down, I spotted the back door of the bar. In addition to the underlying odor of old trash from two open bins nearby, my senses also could smell everything that was Hank’s Bar: musty smoke and cheap beer. I shuffled about another thirty feet; I could see the back door to Hopewell Drugstore. As I walked closer, a yellow, uncovered lightbulb shining off the opposite building illuminated a padlock on the door. I jogged to the door and found the lock was open. I yanked the door open and made my way in.

With no desire to give myself away, I closed the door quietly and pulled out my phone, turning on the flashlight app. All I saw was trash, pillars, and dust. Then I swung left and saw a door.

“Stairs to the third floor, hopefully,” I whispered, opening the door. I

started to make my way up, stopping every few steps, listening for anything. I heard little claws clamoring across the concrete. I tried not to think about sharing the space with rats; I knew where there was one, there were many. At the top, I slid inside the door and found another door about ten feet in front of me. Light glowed from under the threshold, and I stepped closer.

“It might be time, little sister.”

It was Hank.

“You think I’m going to go public with my story? It’s too soon, Hank. I’m telling you they’re still after me.” That had to be Claudia. Her voice had an edge to it, as if she were afraid of her own shadow.

Pressing my ear against the door, my pulse tapped the side of my neck so hard I wondered if it was audible.

“Claudia, outside of one FBI agent who asked a few questions earlier today, no one has been asking about you. Anyone who lives in these parts thinks you’ve moved on to start a new life in another state or country.”

“Wait...an FBI agent talked to you today?” Now she sounded like a panic attack was just a breath away.

“Calm down, Claudia. Come here, let me hold you.”

No sound for a moment.

A long sigh. “Sorry I’m still such a mess, Hank. I just can’t get over everything that happened, everything I saw. I’m not sleeping well. The nightmares won’t go away.”

“I thought those pills helped.”

“They make me drowsy, but just when my head hits the pillow, those images start swirling in my mind. Especially when I saw what happened to that woman. Gang-raped. That’s what it would be called anywhere outside the compound. Inside, they just called it some type of ritual, a woman’s last rite of passage, to have sex with the elders from the camp. As if they were bestowing their wisdom on her. It was fucking sick.”

My heart couldn’t beat any faster. I wanted to bust down the door and make Claudia tell me everything she knew, but given her apprehension in talking to the FBI, right now I was getting more information about her captivity by just eavesdropping.

I heard a huff—probably Hank. A moment later, there was a metal snap. The smell of cat food emanated from under the door. A few kitten meows followed.

“I know you don’t like hearing about my drama, Hank, but the memories just won’t go away.”

“Nothing to think about. It’s history. Behind you.”

“Easy for you to say.”

A heavy breath. “I know...you’re right.”

“I feel guilty.”

“You shouldn’t. It wasn’t your fault. It’s the fault of those sick motherfuckers. That’s why we need to take this to the officials. That FBI lady

who dropped by earlier, I have her number right here. She's—"

"Stop, Hank."

"What?"

"You're pressuring me. I...I just can't. Not now."

"But when, Claudia? You can't sleep, you think people might be after you, trying to kill you. You have all this information you can share with authorities."

The sound of a drawer slamming shut silenced the conversation.

"I'm sorry, Claudia. Sorry if I'm pushing too hard. I don't mean to make you cry."

"It's...it's not you. It's them," she said, sobbing.

A few snuffles, followed by a big nose blow.

"Here, have a beer," Hank said.

I heard a bottle cap ding off a hard surface.

Another heavy breath. "Oh, Hank, how did I get myself into this shit?"

"Do you really want to know?" Hank said with a slight chuckle.

"Seriously, Claudia. You see the good in people, at least you did before you got pulled into that cult. I know it's changed you, which is another reason to tell authorities. You need to see a counselor. Who wouldn't after seeing the crazy shit you did?"

I heard a bottle hit a counter. "I suppose."

"So, you're at least open to it?"

"Maybe. It's just that..."

"Just what?"

"I have trust issues, what can I say?"

"You come by it naturally, Claudia. I'm the same way. But after a while, I have to go with my gut. And the best chance I think we've got is to call up this FBI woman and let her take over. She's got skin in the game. She says she might have a family member who was part of this crazy-ass cult from years ago."

"Oh my God, why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried, but..."

"I know, I was having one of my meltdowns."

Another moment passed, and then I heard an "ah"—Claudia drinking beer.

"Okay, after giving it some thought, you might be right, Hank. I don't want to live the rest of my life in a grungy apartment with two cats that claw up my second-hand furniture."

They shared a good laugh, like sisters do. As if I would know. Suddenly, my phone started ringing. I'd forgotten to click the mute button. I scrambled to tap the red circle to not accept the call.

The door swung open.

"Hi," I said to Hank, still holding my phone in front of me. I peered over her shoulder to see Claudia holding a black and white kitten close to her chest.



“You followed me,” Hank said.

I nodded. “I overheard the last five minutes of your conversation, but I’m glad you called just to make it official. I can help you, and I think you can help me.”

Voices and laughter served as a backdrop of white noise as I replayed the words from Claudia just a couple of hours earlier: during her stay at Camp Israel, she had met a woman named Beulah.

Beulah. The same name the gas station employee had reportedly heard my mom called thirty-two years ago.

Dana, a waitress whose beehive hairdo was being held up by a pen, set a chocolate milkshake in front of Archie.

“Where are the sprinkles?” he whined like a five-year-old.

“We ran out. Sorry.” Dana plopped a straw on the table and then looked at me. “Your tuna melt is taking a while. Turns out Rocko had to run to the store on account we ran out of the cheap shit we get from the supplier.”

“Ahh. I guess that’s good news.”

She cupped a hand to the side of her mouth. “If you saw what I saw when he opened the last can, you’d definitely think that was good news.” She shot me a wink. I suddenly lost my appetite.

“Order up!”

“That’s Rocko. You want a refill on your coffee?”

“Sure.”

“Dana, where are you? Orders are stacking up?”

She clenched fingers around her pen. “One of these days, I’m gonna...” she said as she marched off. Archie slowly leaned out of the booth, watching her backside until she disappeared behind the front counter.

“Dude, there are other people in the restaurant.”

The restaurant looked like a throwback to 1975, with the floral-pattern vinyl, mustard countertops, and a menu that featured tuna melts and chocolate shakes.

“Sorry, no offense to anyone,” he said, holding up a hand.

I shook my head. “So why did you want to meet here of all places?”

“Here” was some dive off Highway 33, just on the border of Virginia and West Virginia.

“Neutral territory.” He tipped back his head and slurped in a mouthful of shake. When he was done, he had a chocolate mustache on top of his regular cheesy mustache. I touched my napkin to my mouth, a signal for him to wipe his mouth. He proceeded to lean across the table.

“What are you doing?” I swatted his hand away.

“Wiping your mouth, like you wanted me to.”

“No, you idiot. You need to wipe your mouth. Chocolate shake is all over your...”

It almost needed a name.

He brushed his arm across his mouth. “Damn sprinkles. If Dana wasn’t so

hot, I'd forge a formal complaint."

I guffawed. "Really? About sprinkles?"

"They're ripping us off. It's false advertising. It says here on the menu that shakes include sprinkles. I'm just looking out for you."

"Me? How are you looking out for me?"

"You're paying, right?"

I pursed my lips, then I glanced out the window and saw Archie's car. It was a rental, one of those two-door cars that had wheels that could fit on Luke's bicycle.

"I thought you drove a Camaro wherever you went."

"Client wouldn't pick up the bill on that kind of sweet ride."

I nodded. "What's the case here in the middle of nowhere?"

His eyes shifted both ways, then he spoke under his breath. "Can't say. Confidential."

I was mildly curious about his so-called confidential client, but also knew that Archie's warped perspective of the world could also view a neighborhood homeowner's association dispute with a resident as a matter of life and death. I didn't have the time or energy to delve further into Archie's life.

Dana arrived with more coffee. I added sugar and cream and took a sip. While ogling Dana's backside as she walked away, Archie slurped more of his shake and, again, used his sleeve to wipe away the remnants from his face. "Now tell me again about this money-making gig you've got for me. Who's this deep-pockets client?"

"Well, it's not exactly a new client. It's just me," I said with caution in my voice.

"You? You don't have any money."

I shrugged. "Correction. I'm no multimillionaire, but I've got a little stashed away for important things."

"And this is important," he repeated.

Resting my forearms on a napkin that covered part of the sticky table, I spoke with a measured voice. "I think my mother might still be alive."

He gave me a blank stare. "Are you sure that coffee isn't spiked?"

"No, Archie. I'm serious."

"After all these years? I thought she died in a traffic accident?"

"I did too. My dad kept the real story from me and moved us away. But he didn't know the whole story; he just thought she'd gone off the deep end, walked out of the hospital. He wanted no part of her."

"Have you ripped him a new one?"

"Can't. I went to his funeral the same day I talked to the guy who we thought had committed vehicular homicide."

He scrunched his eyes together, and I explained the Douglass Butterfield story and how that led me from trying to find my mother's grave to now realizing there was at least a decent possibility she was still alive.

"Did this Claudia person give you a positive ID?"

I removed Mom's small photo from my purse and held it out.

"That's your mom? Wow, she was a looker."

"Nice."

"What? I'm just calling it like I see it. And I see a beautiful young woman."

I flipped the picture over and took another glance, wondering if I saw any of myself in her.

Archie strummed his fingers on the table. "She reminds me of someone... just can't recall her name..."

"Judy Garland?"

"Who?"

"No one. Never mind."

He snapped his fingers. "Oh, I know. That chick from *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Same person, moron."

"Is she?" His shoulders quivered. "Damn, that wicked witch used to give me the heebie-jeebies."

"Anyway, Claudia took a good five minutes to study this photo. She then said she was confident the person she'd met was the same woman in this picture."

"What does she look like now?" He moved the shake to the side and leaned forward over the table. "Claudia said she had lots of gray hair. A good number of wrinkles. But she said her eyes were a giveaway."

He grabbed the photo from my hand and looked at it, then shifted his sights to me, nodding his head. "Yep, you two are related."

"Are you saying I look like Judy Garland?" I was slightly flattered.

"Hell no. Who's that chick with the big nose, short, butchy hair, and sings at all of those gay weddings?"

"Liza Minnelli?" He snapped his fingers. "That's it. You're kind of a cross between that photo and Liza Minnelli."

I withheld the urge to touch my nose, although I did quickly run my fingers through my hair.

"One tuna melt coming up." Dana set the plate right in front of me. The odor quickly invaded my senses.

"Thanks." I was trying to be courteous.

Archie waved his hand across his face, and his eyes bugged out. "Woood... that brings back some memories from high school."

I tilted my head. "What?" Then I thought better of it, holding up my hand. "I don't want to know."

"So, Agent Troutt, what's the game plan?"

"To find my mom, if she's still alive. From what Claudia described, this place where she might be living is worse than a prison. The rules change whenever the leaders want something done...for their little group, or for one of them individually."

He shook his head. "As in sexual favors?"

“Rape, gang rape even. Many of the kids in the camp were born from couples right there, so Claudia suspects there has been incest as well. She was damn lucky to survive and get the hell out of there.”

“Couldn’t she tell authorities?”

I reviewed the sisters’ issues with trusting the FBI.

“And yet they opened up to you?”

“I guess I can be pretty convincing.” I covered the tuna melt with a spare napkin and then popped a few fries in my mouth. Archie turned serious, scratching his head. A few sticks of hay fell to the table. He picked them up and showed his pearly whites. “Okay, I admit it. Felicia came back to the barn.”

“You’re a real gentleman. Did you allow her to take off her boots?”

He turned his palms to the ceiling. “How would she be able to emulate a horse if she couldn’t clop her boots on the barn floor?”

I held up a hand. “Why are you in this part of the country? And why are you sleeping with this married woman?”

“Her horse was under the weather, so they called me.”

“You told her you were a vet?”

“Technically, I didn’t tell them that. I had business cards that gave them my credentials.”

“Fake credentials,” I reminded him. “Is this part of your confidential case?”

“Mum’s the word.”

I huffed out a breath. “Do you want to help me find my mom?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then we need to share information openly. You know me, I can keep a secret.”

He gulped the last of his shake, his eyes drifting away.

“Archie, is there something you want to tell me...need to tell me?”

“It’s nothing. Next steps to find your mom?”

I stared at him an extra second, but decided not to push it. My phone buzzed, and I glanced at the screen. It was the message I’d been waiting on from Gretchen.

I read it and said to Archie, “I’ve got the location of the camp. It’s near a small town just across the border in the Monongahela National Forest, near Parsons, West Virginia.”

“What’s this nuthouse called?”

“Camp Israel.”

His eyes didn’t blink.

“What is it, Archie?”

“Did you lose your appetite, sweetie?” Dana said to me as she approached the table.

“Eh...”

“It’s that tuna, isn’t it? No worries.”

“I’ll take the fries to go.”

She nodded and said she’d be back with a check and a special surprise for Archie.

“She’s a nice diversion, Archie, but something’s up, I can tell. I need to know you’re on board, and that your other case won’t get in the way of finding my mom.”

“Nothing’s up,” he said as Dana came up with what looked like an empty coffee mug. She placed the check on the table. Archie’s eyes stayed on her.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it,” I said.

He never heard me, but neither did our waitress, who flipped the contents of the mug into Archie’s empty shake glass.

It was a cherry.

“It’s yours,” she said with a wink, then she sauntered away while looking over her shoulder.

Archie panted so heavily he sounded like a dog in heat. He probably was. Now something was definitely up.

I followed just behind Archie's poor excuse of a car into the mountains of West Virginia. He suggested we stop to spend the night in Elkins, a small town just south of Parsons, which was nothing more than a small town itself. He said the lone, two-star motel was all his client would pay for. I didn't push back, but his continuous mentioning of finances had me concerned. Something about the guy seemed off, more off than usual.

As for my room, the second-story metal door wouldn't close all the way, and the slick comforter smelled like piss. Besides that, it was first-class accommodations. Archie volunteered to get us breakfast before we sat down with an old-fashioned map and an earth app from my cell phone to try to get a better idea of how Camp Israel was laid out. Right after he left, I completed a series of playful, even somewhat suggestive text messages with Brad. It helped temporarily take my mind off the arduous and potentially dangerous task of infiltrating this camp where Claudia had seen my mom, or someone who looked like her and went by the name Beulah.

My stomach growled as I finished up a call with the kids.

"I was up until two o'clock last night doing chemistry homework. Uggh." My daughter, Erin, had a knack for the dramatic. I chalked it up to being fifteen going on eighteen. At least most of it.

"Do the best you can, Erin, but it's just school. You shouldn't think it's torture."

"Easy for you to say. You went to school in the dark ages."

A smacking sound and then a giggle. "Better stop it, you little twerp," she said sharply.

Had to be Luke. "Erin, please don't call your brother names."

"But he just smacked the back of my neck and said crispy."

"What does that mean?" I asked, almost intrigued.

"I don't know. Some type of stupid middle-school ritual. Real mature, runt."

"Erin..." I started, then heard Ezzy in the background saying something about pulling their lunches together.

"Gotta run, Mom. Love you."

Before I could reciprocate, I heard the phone hit something hard. I shouted, "Your brother. Put him on, please."

A moment later, "Hey, Mom. I'm good. School's good." He giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"Just a video I was watching. You wouldn't believe the shit some people do on camera."

"Luke, really? You don't need to cuss to act older."

"Oh, Mom."

"I'm not naïve. I know you've heard the words."

"So it's no big deal then, right?"

"Just show a little class and act your age. You're a good kid. You don't need to pretend to be this dope street kid."

"Wow, Mom, that was pretty lame."

"But you get my drift, right?"

"Yeah. Later."

"Love you, son."

I could feel my heart ping my chest. I missed my family, even if the kids were at that know-it-all, sassy age.

"Dr. Alex, you coming home soon?" Ezzy had picked up the phone.

"Well, hello to you too."

"Sorry. Just in a rush. Do what you need to do. Despite their occasional smart-alecky attitudes, the kids are doing fine."

I thanked her, and we hung up. My body craved caffeine, even more than food. I found a pen and pulled back the curtains. The stiff fabric made a crinkling noise, which made me wonder what was coated on them.

"Isn't that Archie?" I said out loud. He had on his usual mirrored sunglasses, but was talking to another gentleman, who had similar sunglasses, with short, cropped hair and a blue blazer. He looked like a generic middle-aged mannequin from a department store. They were standing next to Archie's miniature car. Given the hand gestures by the other gentleman, it appeared Archie was doing a lot of listening.

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you up to, Mr. Woods?" I realized I'd just spoken to myself for the second time in the last few minutes. *I guess it comes with having a cat.*

Archie arrived at the door a couple of minutes later and handed me my coffee. It was damn good. He pulled kolaches and two apples from the sack.

"I'll give an attempt at being healthy," I said, buffing the apple on my denim shirt. I took a bite, but my two front teeth almost came out in the process. "Crap. I think the apple is petrified."

Archie tossed his apple in the bag. "Oh well, you should see what a horse can do to an apple."

"I wouldn't know." I opened the wrapper and had a bite of my kolache. "I never would have thought you and the country life could commingle so easily."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Eh, I'm pretty easygoing. I can usually adjust to my surroundings."

"So are you going to tell me why you posed as a vet? Was it just to have your way with Felicia?"

He gulped some coffee, then wiped his mustache with a napkin. "I would say it was strictly part of my...uh, case, but I'd be lying. She's easy on the eyes, that's for sure."

I thought I heard a bit of a country twang in his voice. "Are you sure you



just don't mean easy?"

"Ha. Funny, Alex. I was told to get close to people in the town. That's all I did."

I nodded. "So is that what you were doing in the parking lot a few minutes ago?"

His mouth stopped chewing. "You were spying on me?"

"Takes one to know one." I arched an eyebrow and pinched off some more of my breakfast and ate it.

"Just some guy I met at the kolache store," he said casually.

We unfolded a large paper map on the round table and pulled up the earth application on my phone.

I turned to look at Archie. "A guy from the kolache store followed you back to the motel?"

"What? He...uh, you know, was pissed that I cut in line. You know how people can be."

Archie was keeping something from me. As I began to identify the location of the compound from the coordinates Gretchen had given me, I couldn't help but wonder if Archie's baggage might hinder our mission.

Plopping my phone down on a crease in the map, I said, "Archie, I need to know."

"I'm a Pisces, I majored in pre-med in college, and I lean to the left."

"Lean...what?"

"I'm not talking about politics, if you know what I mean." He nudged my arm and chuckled once, then downed a kolache in a single bite.

"Why would you go there?"

"You're not a believer. You want to see for yourself? It's not something I joke about." He stood up and grabbed the top of his jeans.

"If you unsnap those pants, I'm going to take this pen and puncture a hole in your neck."

His butt hit the chair. "No need to get violent. Wait...you've seen my package. Remember, down in South Padre, after that psycho bitch tied me to the bed post in my birthday suit."

I picked up my phone, feigning to look for a text from Brad, or any other human.

"Ah, I can see you just got a visual." He smiled and used a single finger to jab my ribs. I somehow managed not to giggle.

"No worries, I know you and Brad are officially an item. I'm respectful of another man's turf."

I slowly turned his way. "I'm not a fire hydrant, and he didn't piss on me to mark his territory. We're dating."

"Peeeww," he said, waving a hand in front of his face. "Someone's been pissing on something in this room. Smells like a boy's locker room. Now, did Gretchen mention the size of the camp?"

To get off the topic of his package and his overall foul state of mind, I

swiped my phone and pulled up the earth app. “Wait, you never really answered my question, Archie. In fact, you just spent the last five minutes trying to get me to forget about it altogether. Come on, Archie, what’s going on in your life? What we’re about to do here is too important. I can’t afford for you to disappear, or maybe go rogue on me.”

He gently touched my arm, a serious look of concern on his face. “Alex, all of my shenanigans aside, I understand what this means to you. It’s your mom, for God’s sake. Oh, sorry for the unintended poor choice of words.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just don’t want you to think of this as just another case, or another way to make a few bucks.”

His lips pulled tight. “I guess we never discussed my rate. Not to be a douche, but what do you consider to be a few bucks?”

I gave him a blank stare.

“Okay, my standard rate and not a dime more,” he said, looking out the window for a moment. “Now if you pay with cash on the day we finish the case, then I can give you a two-percent discount.”

“Two? That’s all?” I could feel a headache coming on. I sipped more of my coffee. “Forget I said anything, Archie. I’ll pay you every dollar I owe you...in cash if you like.”

He rubbed his hands together. “Sweet. Now where were we?”

While I didn’t feel like he was being above board about his run-in with the fella downstairs—or his other case and especially his top secret client—I knew pressing him further would only create more frustration. For me mostly. Archie and I had a history, and while we’d had our differences, ultimately, I’d been able to trust him. And nothing could change that core belief.

Then why did questions continue to ping my mind?

“So, the camp is right about here,” I said, drawing a circle southeast of Parsons on the big map.

“How big?”

“Gretchen said it’s just under a hundred acres. Now, in looking at my app on my phone, I can zoom in here to see the tops of the buildings. Looks like there’s a barn and four other buildings. Gretchen is still researching to see if she can find specs for the buildings, through permits or whatever.”

Archie nodded, his dark eyes studying the phone.

“You’re thinking something. What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just getting in the zone. Four buildings. Do we know how many people are in the camp?”

“Good question. Claudia guessed there were about a hundred or so, and at least half were kids, if not more. She also said there were three generations. She knew a woman who had been there, had kids, and now her kids had kids.”

“Inbreeding in the hillbilly mountains of West Virginia,” Archie said with a straight face. “Who would have thought?”

“Sadly, you might be right.”

“Seriously? I was just throwing shit against the wall. That’s sick.”

“Claudia said she met a couple of kids who appeared to be slow, and then she heard through the grapevine that their parents were actually first cousins.”

Using the thin napkins from the sack, Archie wiped his hands, his face scrunched up like a prune. “Just because people can have sex, doesn’t mean they should. We’re dealing with some twisted folks.”

He lifted from his chair and stepped to the window, arching his back. “That mattress last night sucked.”

“We paid, what, twenty-nine bucks? What did you expect?”

“Not sure I got more than a couple hours of sleep.” He rubbed his face, then turned around to grab his coffee. I could still see steam drifting out of the little hole.

Two quick, chinking sounds, and shattering glass rained on top of me. Ducking my head, I grabbed the back of Archie’s windbreaker and yanked. At first he didn’t budge.

“Get down!” I dropped to the floor, tugging harder on his jacket, and he tumbled on top of me. He landed face first right on top of my chest. I think I heard another *chink* and more glass sprinkled the air. I closed my eyes and tucked my head tight against his.

A few seconds ticked by, then I heard a baby crying. My neck felt warm. Was it blood?

“Archie, were you hit?” I pushed him off me and glass fell from his curly bed of hair.

“I’m good,” he said, trying to get to his feet. “I think I froze.”

“Get out of the line of sight,” I said, waving my arm.

He hunkered down.

“What are you thinking?”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Keep your head down,” I said, reaching up to the bed to grab my purse. “You got your piece?” I pulled my Glock.

“Crap. Left it in my room.”

I duckwalked over to the door and then stood up. “It was a rifle. Nothing too high-powered. Caliber was maybe a .223 Remington.”

“A deer hunter,” Archie said, pulling up next to me.

I held a finger to my mouth. More voices and the cry of the baby now echoed off the walls and pavement somewhere outside.

“We can’t stay in here forever. Try to get to your room and grab your weapon. I’ll provide cover. Got it?”

He nodded. I swung the door open, two hands firmly gripping the Glock, my weight anchored. No gunshots.

Archie slid behind me, and while keeping his torso no higher than the four-foot railing, he got to his room then came back out, gun at the ready. “See anything?”

I’d been scanning the parking lot and anything in my line of sight that was as high as we were.

“Only see trees. Someone could be perched in any one of them, waiting to fire again.”

Another wail from the child.

I looked to my left, and a toddler walked out of an open door at the other end of the landing. I saw no adult figure anywhere around.

“Cover me.” I took off running, hoping the sniper wouldn’t be warped enough to shoot the kid. Not slowing down a bit, I scooped up the little boy, who was wearing only a diaper.

A boom caused me to spontaneously jump in the air. “Crap.” I looked down into the parking lot and saw an old truck billowing smoke out of its tailpipe. It must have backfired.

I cut left into the room and found two girls and two guys hovered over a bunch of cards sprawled out on the bed.

I set the kid down, and a girl wearing nothing more than a glorified bikini hopped off the bed and picked him up. That was when I noticed the kid was holding a piece of chocolate. It coated his mouth and was smeared across his cheeks, likely from all of his tears.

“Poor guy.” I shut the door, then peered through the curtain. Nothing moving in any of the trees.

“Didn’t you hear the bullets?” I said without looking behind me.

“Whatever, lady. It was nothing,” one of the boys said.

I picked up a strange waft, and I quickly looked over my shoulder.

“You’re smoking weed? What the hell?” I said, moving closer.

“Shit, dude, she’s got a gun.” A skinny kid who didn’t look like he’d started shaving yet kicked his legs until he fell off the bed.

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing, just doing our thing, until you busted up the party,” the boy on the floor said.

I realized all four had on very few clothes. “Put out the weed. What are the four of you up to?”

“Just playing a game of strip poker, that’s all. We’re eighteen. We can vote and fight for our country. Means we can do just about anything we want, cop.”

“I’m no cop.” I went back to the door, peeked outside, then gave a thumbs-up to Archie. He had a phone to his ear. “Sheriff is on his way,” he yelled. “I think we’re clear for now.”

I shut the door and turned around to see the boy popping the top on a beer.

“Didn’t you guys hear anything?”

“Only some car backfiring.”

“There was a shooting.”

“No shit?” He burped as he spoke, and the other three laughed.

“Nice. You don’t get it. Someone could have been hurt or killed, starting with this little guy. Is this your kid?”

The girl nodded, holding the toddler on the side of her hip. “Don’t be

telling me how to parent. I got every right to do what I want. He's got food and shelter."

"And I've got every right to call in child protective services and take that kid to a family who will take care of him."

I opened the door and ran into an immovable object. Standing next to Archie was a man whose gut was so big I couldn't see his belt.

"Sheriff Tom Kupchak." The man tipped his hat, then turned to look out across the parking lot. "We need to figure out what kind of trouble the two of you brought to town."

This was going to be a fun conversation.

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And I thought I was a tough interrogator. I had underestimated Sheriff Kupchak. Or at least his foul breath.

Practically cornering us in my room, where a couple of uniforms and one so-called detective milled about—apparently waiting for a clue to jump out and grab someone by the throat—Sheriff Kupchak grilled us for a good hour. Although as time moved along, with Archie squirming like he had to use the bathroom, the sheriff's questions morphed into political statements about his community.

"We're a quiet, humble town, full of law-abiding, hardworking Americans. American values, you know what I mean?" He looked us both over. I bit my tongue and hoped his preaching would soon end. "Most everyone here just goes about their business. Now when outsiders roll into town and the proverbial shit hits the fan...or a window in this case, then we got problems. And the only sure way to get rid of problems is to get rid of the root cause."

He gnawed on a soggy toothpick as his obscene breath invaded my pores, but I held my breath and forced out a response. "What happened to law enforcement collaboration, since, of course, we're all essentially on the same side, trying to put bad guys behind bars?"

"I'm a team player. Everyone's a team player in this room, on my small force. But if there's an elephant in the room, I can't just ignore it."

Archie snorted out a laugh.

The sheriff nodded slowly. "Something you want to say, Mr. Woods?"

"Uh, no. I, uh, have this allergy thing going. Being in the mountains and all." He then faked a sneeze. It was the worst acting job of all time.

"Elephant in the room," I said with one hand firmly planted on my hip. "Care to elaborate?"

He chuckled. "Flashing your fancy badge." He pointed at me. "And then bragging about all of your Jason Bourne adventures," he said, nodding at Archie, "just makes you stand out for the wrong reasons. So now we got us a shooting to investigate. Yet no one got hurt, and the only two people who seem to care are standing right here. Outsiders. How many resources do you

think I have to put on a case like this? This ain't Interpol, you know."

Both Archie and I stood there in stunned silence—until Archie threw a thumb over his shoulder. "I really gotta go. Do you mind?"

Sheriff Kupchak and I both rolled our eyes, and Archie disappeared in the restroom.

"So, Agent Troutt, let's start by you telling me the nature of your visit to Elkin, West Virginia."

"Just driving through."

"Playing it that way?"

"It's the truth."

"The truth? Ha!" His baritone voice pummeled my eardrums. "The truth and the federal government don't belong in the same sentence."

"First of all, I'm not a government. I'm a person. I can't speak for every other employee who works for the US government, whether it be federal, state, or even at the local level such as yourself..." I let that one linger an extra second. "But my ethics weren't drained from my body the moment I accepted my FBI creds. How about you?"

He rolled his mashed-up toothpick to the other side of his mouth. "Ethics. Yeah, okay, we can go there if you want, but trust me, that's a battle you'll never win in Elkins, or any other town in this area."

I ran my fingers through my hair, realizing Sheriff Kupchak was just baiting me at this point. As the town Grand Poobah, he could say or do anything he wanted.

He curled his fingers toward his body and wiggled them. "Come on now, Agent. I need to know what the two of you are up to. How else can I properly investigate this shooting?"

He had a point, but my trust factor wasn't real high.

"Hey, Alex," Archie said, rounding the corner from the bathroom with something in his hand, "is this one of those dual-purpose bathroom tools? Toothbrush and vibrator all in one." He smiled and switched it on.

"What are you doing going through my stuff?" I snatched it out of his hand. "It's a tooth brush, you fool. Sheesh."

Sheriff Kupchak shook his head while sticking both thumbs into his hidden belt loop. "Just what I thought. Whatever happened to the good ol' American values?"

I could have tried to explain that Archie was an idiot and I'd never heard of a dual-purpose toothbrush and vibrator. And on top of that, I had Brad. But this guy's brain was thicker than a block of granite, so I didn't see the reason to waste my energy.

"Are you done with us?" I asked.

"I can't hold you on anything...that I know of, unless we find something around this room that's illegal."

"No worries. We'll be out of here in two minutes," I said, giving Archie the signal to grab his stuff. I turned back to the sheriff who had started talking

to one of his deputies.

“Hey, Sheriff, what’s going to happen to that little boy?”

“The one down the hall you scared with your gun?” he snapped back.

I counted to three. “Uh, yeah. Him.”

“Nothing. He’s going to stay with his mama where he belongs.”

“What the fuck?”

“Excuse me?” He took a step in my direction, his flesh turning pink.

“Don’t you realize what she was doing in that room, and the other so-called adults? That’s endangerment to a child, just for starters. They can’t even take care of themselves, let alone a little kid.”

Archie touched my arm as I stepped closer to the center of the room.

“Alex, he’s a dumbass hick. He doesn’t get it. It’s a waste of your time.”

“What the hell did you say, boy?”

Archie poked his own chest, sticking out his neck. “Me?”

“Yeah, you. You mouthin’ off, just like your bitchy partner?”

“Screw you, asshole. And the only person in this state who can say she’s bitchy is me.”

“Thanks, Archie. I think,” I muttered.

The sheriff opened his pie hole, but I held up my hand. “Save it for someone who cares.”

I grabbed my stuff and headed for the door, pulling out my phone. At the threshold, I turned back around and locked eyes with the sheriff, although I could feel stares from the others in the room. I dialed information and said, “Get me the number for child protective services for the state of West Virginia.”

Then I flipped on my heels and walked out.

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Standing in the lawn of First Trinity Church of Elkin, Archie and I cupped our hands as we gazed up at the bell tower in the steeple of the brick church. A bright sun had just risen above the angled rooftop. I walked a few steps to where I was under a canopy of trees and was able to see the sheriff’s team moving in and out of my motel room about a hundred yards away.

“Unless the shooter was up on a firetruck ladder, or dangling from a helicopter, I think this might be the only structure in town where he could have shot from and still hit my second-floor room,” I said. “What do you think?”

When Archie didn’t respond, I shifted my eyes to find him at the top of the church’s stone steps, yanking on the front door. “It’s locked.” He looked through a small, vertical window next to the door. “All dark. No one’s in yet.”

Not surprising, considering it was still prior to nine in the morning on Tuesday. Archie joined me back on the lawn.

“Any theories on who would have wanted to kill you?” I had intentionally waited until we were clear of Sheriff Kupchak before I broached this topic

with my partner.

“Me? Why me? They could have been shooting at you.”

He already sounded defensive. Something I was hoping to avoid. I needed to crack through his shell of secrecy, regardless of what it took.

“You were standing in front of the window, Archie. I think it’s pretty obvious.”

Jingling change in his pocket, he moved around the tree, studying the bark and leaves, acting like he was a horticulturist.

“You have nothing to say?”

He paused, his hand touching a green leaf. “With the cover of the tree and the distance, he probably just saw a figure. Remember, we were in your room, not mine.”

He had a point.

“Besides that, you found Claudia, who could be at the top of this cult’s most-wanted list. Why do you think she was in hiding? Because she feared for her life.”

I clenched my jaw, pissed for two reasons: he’d twisted my words around to make me think I was indeed the target, and now I was fearful for Claudia. “Crap. Now you’ve got me worried about Claudia. Let me put in a quick call to Hank, her sister.”

As I found the number to the bar, Archie’s phone rang. “Gotta take this,” he said, turning his back to me and moving over to the next tree.

I spoke to Hank, who assured me that Claudia was still safe, although going a bit stir crazy from not being out of the makeshift apartment for three months straight. She asked if I’d addressed the rescue of my mother. “You are going to bring in help, aren’t you?” she asked.

Eyeing Archie’s back, I said, “That’s the plan, yes.”

“FBI or outside?”

“Outsider, but he has knowledge of how I operate. It’s a good fit.” As the words left my mouth, I felt a tinge of doubt creeping into my voice. But she didn’t seem to notice.

“Good luck, Alex. And remember, once you pull this off, I trust you that you’ll pull in Claudia when it’s right. When you have the right set of people aligned, she might need a new identity and everything.”

We had discussed that possibility during our visit. I hadn’t made promises, but said the FBI would take every precaution necessary to ensure her safety. And I meant it. But I also couldn’t predict the future.

First things first. Verifying if Beulah was indeed my mom and then figuring out how to safely get her out of the camp.

Hank and I ended our brief conversation, but Archie was still on the phone, pacing back and forth between two trees, as if he were a pinball.

I thumbed a quick group text to Gretchen, Brad, and Nick, asking if they could identify the members of the church. In a rural area like this, the number couldn’t be that high. I also asked if they could figure out anyone who had



access to get inside the church—officials, administrative personnel, or deacons.

Archie meandered my way, pocketing his phone. While he'd come out of the shooting without a visible scratch, he now looked like he'd been punched in the face.

"Everything okay?"

He wiped his face. "Just tired."

"Tired, or tired of someone in particular."

He shifted his eyes to me. "I don't want to get into it."

He seemed drained.

"I talked to Hank, and she said Claudia is fine. No issues on her end."

"You're assuming, then, the shooter was after me?" he asked.

"This isn't a popularity contest, Archie. We can't put our heads in the sand and pretend this isn't related to something you or I are working on—this cult, or your case, or maybe even one of your old cases."

He nodded, but didn't seem on board with my line of thinking. He paced back and forth, slowly. That was when I noticed a toe poking out of one of his running shoes.

"Archie, you're broke, aren't you?"

He looked at me, but his lips didn't move.

"You're too proud to admit it, right?"

A slow nod. "Why couldn't you tell me? It's not something to be ashamed of."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Did you forget how to speak?"

"I can't...I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"You said 'I can't.' Why can't you?"

"Shit, Alex, get off my case, will you? Fuck!"

I stared at him, but he refused to look at me. "Fine," I said, walking toward my car.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find someone who's got the balls to help me get my mother out of this camp."

"Stop," he said, moving toward me. "I want to help. I know how much this means to you."

I had my door open, one foot inside the car. "Then tell me what the fuck is going on."

He glanced up and down the street. "Can you close your door and let's get back under the trees?"

I huffed out a breath and then grudgingly complied. With my arms folded across my chest and both of us in the shadow of a large tree, I said, "I'm ready."

"You're right. I don't have a penny to my name."

"What happened to your money-making agency? Your website,

whiteshaft.com? And didn't you hire an assistant?"

He twisted his lips under his bushy mustache. "A little bit of that was smoke and mirrors. Carrie was a Filipino girl I met online in a group chat session about finding a mail-order bride."

"Tell me that was a case you were working on." It was difficult not to show my disgust.

He shook his head while saying, "That was a case I was working on."

"Which one is it?"

"Okay, I lied. It was a personal thing...just curiosity. The Internet is a dangerous weapon, that's for sure."

I didn't really want to know, but I had to ask. "Did you pay for a bride and the girl never showed up?"

"Never got that far. But I met an investment specialist online, and he basically sucked me dry of every dime I had. Retirement money, everything. Which led to..."

"Yes?"

"I forgot to pay the IRS."

"You forgot?"

"On purpose. I forgot on purpose."

I could feel my gut tighten as his story continued digging a deeper hole. "And...?"

"The IRS tracked me down. We had some intense discussions. Well, they talked and I just sat there," he said. "Then, out of nowhere, this FBI agent shows up to a meeting. And he offers me a deal. Work this case for them and they'll erase all my IRS debt. I couldn't pass it up."

My fingers dug into the tree bark, wondering where this would all end.

"What's the case, Archie? Why were we shot at?"

"Well, Agent Vandiver said this might happen. I just didn't believe him. I wasn't paying attention to everything around me."

"The guy in the parking lot. Vandiver?"

He nodded, his expression that of a scolded boy.

"And?"

He lifted his chest, then released a bag of air. "I was asked to do some undercover work at Camp Israel."

My heart almost exploded out of my chest. "You did what?"

His neck practically disappeared into his body cavity. "You heard me," he said meekly.

My vision became clouded with little black spots, and I could feel bark wedge under my fingernails as I clawed at the tree.

"Do you need some water?" he asked.

"I'm fine." I pinched the inner corners of my eyes, then tested my vision again. Okay for now. "Give it all up, Archie."

"I'm kind of naive about everything at Camp Israel...well, up until the point you reached out to me and shared Claudia's story."

“You’re confusing me, which isn’t the first time. What in the hell was your undercover assignment about?”

“Is. It still is an assignment, at least when Vandiver needs me,” he said, looking up into the dense tree. Anything to avoid eye contact, apparently.

“More confusion, Archie. I need facts. And quickly, before I kick your ass.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “The FBI was investigating the leaders of Camp Israel for fraud, money laundering, and a bunch of other financial crimes.”

“Financial?”

He turned his palms to the sky. “Vandiver only told me the place was backward, run by some religious fanatics who might be living double lives.”

“Double lives?”

“Acting like they’re all into this Bible beating, but then running some type of financial scam on the side. But the FBI is having a hard time finding a money trail, or the start of one. Frankly, Vandiver didn’t tell me much. You know the whole song and dance...the less I know, blah, blah, blah.”

“Have you actually been inside the camp?” My voice was laced with venom at this point.

“Yes, yes. Keep calm, Alex. I’m on your team.”

“I’ll decide that, thank you. What did you see? And how did you get in?”

“The FBI toyed with their electrical power. I was part of a crew that went in to work on restoring power.”

“Hard hat and all?” I asked, touching my hair, knowing how sensitive he was to someone messing with his helmet hair.

“I did it for the cause.”

I tilted my head.

“To keep me out of jail. The IRS said they would prosecute me, dammit.”

“What was your mission once you got on the inside?”

“Mostly visual intel. Looking for any semblance of an operation that might be used to run a financial scheme. And if I had an opportunity, they wanted me to load this program onto a laptop. Probably put some type of tracking software on it that makes it easier for the FBI to follow their activity.” He held up a flash drive. “Just as I was about to enter that small building in the back of the compound you were showing me on your phone earlier, a man from the camp called me out and told me not to go in that building. He said I could have access to the electric through a box hanging on the outside.”

“So you saw just that one man?”

“Got the best look at him, yes. Saw a couple of other men milling about. Oh, I saw two girls inside the fence of this garden, picking vegetables or something. Vandiver was right.”

“How so?”

“Their clothes. It was like I’d been transported back in time a hundred years.”

I tore off a small branch and began to pick apart the leaves, my mind grinding through the information Archie had shared. “Vandiver...he’s going to need you to go back in.”

“How did you know? That was him on the phone telling me the same thing.” He forced out a chuckle. I wasn’t laughing.

“Set up a meeting with Vandiver, but don’t tell him that I’ll be with you. Make it at a neutral public setting.”

He pulled out his phone, then glanced up at me. “I...”

“Spit it out, Archie.”

“I don’t want to get in trouble. My life depends on me finishing this mission successfully.”

I didn’t want to get into a debate about whose life was more important. “That’s why I want to talk. The FBI leaders on this case need to understand the full picture of what’s really going on in there. Ultimately, I want them to understand that if I get what I need, they’ll get what they need. A win-win.”

They just didn’t know to what lengths I would go to win, the IRS be damned.

Beulah took a moment to rub her aching knees—a direct result of sitting at the altar and being forced to pray for two hours straight yesterday, following the gut-wrenching killing of Hodia Harrington right in front of her own daughter. Wiping her brow, she lifted out of her seat to join the other ladies in the washroom, where they cleaned all of the elders’ dirty clothes. It was a weekly job, one that took tremendous stamina from handwashing each and every article of clothing, as well as an astute focus on the detailed task of ironing. The clothes had to be immaculate by the time she turned off the hot steam iron.

The chatter in the washroom was more vocal than any time Beulah could recall. Usually the discussions were nothing more than whispers and almost always related to the tasks at hand.

But the shooting of Hodia had roused the emotions of everyone in the camp, even if their faces didn’t show it.

“I don’t know why I’m astounded that after all these years, we still have charlatans living within the confines of the camp,” Ruth said, the second lady to join the group, following Beulah so many years ago.

Ruth was built like a submarine: compact, portly, but always able to raise her telescope and observe those around her.

“When Jamin fired that bullet, I almost heaved up my lunch,” Moriah said. She and Ruth had been connected at the hip for the last several years. Moriah, with long, thin limbs and the neck of a giraffe, often sounded like Ruth’s public relations person, justifying every word that came out of her friend’s mouth.

“But, Moriah, you must know that the bullet from that gun wasn’t loaded by just some ordinary thug who was robbed of his drug money. It was a bullet sent from heaven above. Knowing Jamin, I would imagine that he’s been weeping ever since he pulled the trigger. I’m sure it was difficult to do what he did, but we must be thankful for his strength.”

“Amen, Ruth. Amen.”

Beulah straightened out the collar of a shirt and laid it flat on her ironing board, her mind intent on staying focused on her chores, to hopefully snuff out the inner voice that wanted to speak up.

Ruth leaned closer to her running buddy, Moriah, practically ignoring Beulah’s presence, even though she stood no more than ten feet away. “I just can’t understand what makes some women tick. I know she was upset by her child, but ultimately isn’t she to blame for her daughter’s transgressions?”

Beulah turned her head slowly, but quickly regained her composure and repositioned the shirt on the ironing board. Ruth glanced in her direction, but that was all. Moriah had to respond to Ruth. It apparently gave her oxygen.

“Kids are only a reflection of their parents. And in this instance, we all know that Amber didn’t have the advantage of so many other offspring in this camp.”

Beulah bit the side of her cheek, trying to ignore their snooty gossip. She knew that Amber’s father was not one of the elders, as was the case with so many others. Hodiah, whose real name was Shirley Harrington, was one of the few to bring her child with her. She had been able to convince Amber that this way of life would secure them a place in eternal heaven, but only if they followed the teachings of Malachi and his self-chosen elders.

“Then again, Moriah, we’re all snowflakes. And Amber, despite being just sixteen, knew full and well what she was saying and doing. It wasn’t just reprehensible, it was just plain stupid. We should not feel a bit of pity for that girl.”

“What did Amber do that was so bad?” Beulah couldn’t believe the words had poured out of her mouth, and she pressed her lips shut.

Ruth slowly turned her torso, her beady, green eyes narrowing. “And look who just decided to come back to life, Moriah. It’s the one and only, Beulah,” she said derisively, elbowing her friend in the arm.

“Yeah, Beulah, we wondered if you’d lost the ability to speak. You know, turned into one of those Helen Keller mutes.” The two ladies giggled like twelve-year-old schoolgirls.

A wave of heat moved up Beulah’s neck until her head felt like it might set on fire and explode. But she kept her eyes down as she counted each time the iron moved a complete cycle, up and back.

“So even though you won’t pay us any decent respect,” Ruth said, rolling up her sleeves as if she were about to step into a boxing ring, “I’ll tell you what that little heathen did. Jaala—well, I guess we should now call her Amber—dared to yell at Malachi. She said that even though she believed in his teachings and the word of the Lord, she could no longer sit idly by and witness such blatant favoritism. She said it wasn’t right, and she wasn’t going to stand for it anymore.”

Beulah turned her head toward Ruth.

“That’s right, the teenage girl committed blasphemy, that’s what she did,” Moriah said while nodding repeatedly.

“But it’s the truth. And the two of you know it, just like everyone else around here does,” Beulah countered as she quickly realized that she’d let the shirt she had just folded fall to the table, crumpled. Now she would need to start over.

“The truth?” Ruth said.

Beulah could hear the irritation in Ruth’s voice, but again, she forced her eyes to the ironing board, hoping her rebellious thoughts would pass, as they had hundreds of other times in three decades.

“You want to speak the truth? The truth lies in the Good Book, and nowhere else,” Ruth said, pointing to a table where a Bible sat. “And we

should be grateful to the Man above that He has given us leaders like Jamin and Malachi to show us the way, to teach us wrong from right, and if we're lucky, to turn a few souls away from the devil. But there are times when the devil is so embedded in a person's heart that it's turned to rot. And what can grow in rot?"

Moriah shook her head. "Nothing grows in rot, Ruth. Nothing good anyway."

"And Malachi could see that. His vision and wisdom are unlike any person who has walked this earth since Jesus. No one has told us that, but considering I'm well into my sixth decade on this planet, I know when I've been blessed to live with a prophet."

With her jaw still and her fists clenching the shirt, Beulah lifted her eyes until they locked onto Ruth's. "You truly believe that Malachi is a prophet? He's nothing more than a—"

"Okay, Miss Beulah." Shiloh had just walked into the washroom, apparently oblivious to the conversation. "I'm ready to take the next load of clothes."

Ruth had started moving toward Beulah, but now stopped.

"My, you're quick, Shiloh," Moriah said. "Are you sure you did a thorough job? You know you can't disappoint Malachi and his elders. Our work must be worthy of their wisdom."

A foul taste crawled up the back of Beulah's throat, and if Shiloh weren't in the room, she wasn't sure how she would have responded to Moriah's latest ignorant comments.

"Miss Beulah, do you have another load for me?"

"Yes, dear. It's right over here, stacked and ready to go," she said, purposely avoiding eye contact with Ruth. She could feel the woman's steely glare and knew that once Shiloh left the room, the tension would reach a boiling point. And right now, given what she had witnessed the day prior, she didn't trust herself to not respond in a transparent manner. And she knew that might get her killed.

"I'll tell you what, Shiloh. This is a big load. Why don't I carry half and you take the other half?"

"Oh, thank you. I enjoy being able to have our conversations."

As they marched out of the room, Beulah knew that poisoned eye darts were pelting her back, but she refused to turn around.

"Okay, these are Malachi's laundered shirts and undergarments, so I guess we're headed to the second floor, room 210, in the elders' building."

As they walked down the long hallway toward the rear exit, Shiloh looked up and gave her a sad smile. Then it hit Beulah. She'd momentarily forgotten that Shiloh had been inside Jamin's room just two nights earlier. That had been the initial domino that had eventually led to Amber's outburst and Jamin shooting Hodiah.

"Miss Beulah, do you think Hodiah is in heaven right now?"

"I'm sure she is, Shiloh."

"But I thought everyone in heaven is happy. How can she be happy?"

Beulah pulled down on the metal lever to open the back door, and a rush of cold wind slapped her in the face. "Let's hurry across the courtyard, Shiloh."

The pair scooted through open space as leaves swirled all around them. For a brief moment, a rush of wind lifted Shiloh's skirt to show her bare legs. She flapped it back down, and the pair finally made it to the landing of the elders' building. Once inside, they both removed leaves from their hair, laughing a bit at their silliness.

They stopped off at the water fountain, and each took a sip. As Beulah wiped her mouth, Shiloh whispered in her ear. "Did you not want to answer my question?"

"No, it isn't that, Shiloh. It's...complicated."

"How so?"

"We can't really say what it's like to be in heaven since none of us have been there." She shrugged her shoulders and winked.

"But I thought that Malachi was the messenger. He has a special relationship and therefore sees and knows things others can't."

Beulah's breathing became labored. She didn't want to fill Shiloh's head with thoughts that might one day get her in trouble. Deadly trouble. "I'm not an expert, Shiloh. I'll just say that watching what happened was difficult. And I'm sure it was for you as well."

"Miss Beulah?"

"Yes, Shiloh."

"I don't think I've ever been in love before, even though the elders keep trying to get me to date that boy named Abishai. He's just a pest," she said, swatting the air with her hand. "But seeing how they treated Jaala, and then how Jamin killed her mother like that, I didn't get angry. I got real sad. It really broke my heart in two."

Beulah rested her hand on the girl's shoulder. "It's okay to share this with me, Shiloh. In fact, I'm really glad you did."

They walked down the hall and then took the staircase up to the second floor.

"Miss Beulah, I feel like I kind of started all of this, you know, being so possessive of that coat."

"You were put in an awkward position, Shiloh. And you had nothing to do with anyone getting hurt. Please know that, okay?"

"I don't know—"

"Shiloh, you must believe me. It's okay to be sad. Squabbling over a coat should never lead to someone being whipped or, even worse, killed."

Beulah knew she had taken it a step too far, but she couldn't let Shiloh carry the burden of the death of Amber's mother. It would eat her alive.

While balancing the pile of clothes, Shiloh curled some loose locks



behind her ear. “Even still, I want to tell Amber I’m sorry for her loss. Do you know where she is?”

Shiloh’s kindness made her heart ache, but not for the most obvious reason. Beulah had not gone there, not wanting to think about the exile or excommunication that had likely taken place. Amber had most probably been sent into the mountains without any clothes or food or water, to die at the hands of the wild animals. Tears pooled in Beulah’s eyes as she let another memory slip into her frontal lobe—when Shiloh’s parents had attempted an escape when their daughter was just a baby. Their punishment? Malachi had kept their baby, Shiloh, at the camp, and he’d released the couple into the wilderness in the middle of a snowstorm that brought over two feet of snow to the area. They probably hadn’t lasted for more than a day. Shiloh had been told that her parents died trying to find food for those in the camp—a noble cause.

“I haven’t seen her around. I’m sure she’s somewhere trying to feel better about things,” Beulah said. “Okay, here we are.”

They stopped as they reached room 210, expecting to see a chair where they could put the clothes. But it wasn’t there. The door was cracked open. Beulah paused for a second, knowing that retribution would be handed out if they were to lay the laundry on the floor. She knocked three times.

“Hello, Malachi. It’s Beulah and Shiloh with your laundry.” The door creaked opened, and she stepped inside. It was more of a suite, with a dressing area, a small living area, and a bedroom.

The bedroom. She knew every little crack in the ceiling, even if it had been almost three years since her last sexual encounter with their leader. Like so many other aspects of her life, she’d been able to block out those memories, at least most of them.

“Malachi,” she called out again.

But there was no response.

As if she were programmed to move in that direction, she found herself at the threshold of Malachi’s bedroom, Shiloh somewhere behind her. Her eyes couldn’t help but find the things that had stolen her focus on her previous visit: a crucifix affixed in a three-dimensional frame nailed to the wall on the opposite side of the king-size bed. The figure inside seemed so real, as if she could reach out and feel the prick of the crown of thorns, wipe away the blood dripping from his hands and feet. She had examined every last detail of the figure that represented Jesus, all while Malachi grunted and groaned while pounding her insides with such ferocity that it not only brought tears of pain but also tears of utter disdain for Malachi. He was the man who had convinced her to take the leap of faith that would lead to an eternal life of happiness. He was the man who had persuaded her to leave her small child and husband and walk the path of humility and devotion to their Creator.

Malachi.

The Messenger.

She couldn't turn away. She couldn't stop the continuous playback of that last night. The humiliation. The horror. The self-loathing that lasted for months following. And her promise to herself to never let it happen again. No matter what.

A swell of emotion invaded her senses, her hands trembling as they held the clothes. A line of perspiration formed on her back, and she took a few steps, standing next to his dresser, the bed only a few feet away. As much as she wanted to set the bed on fire, or take an ax to it, she couldn't move any closer. It still held a power over her. Feeling lightheaded, she rested a free arm on the dresser. Something moved. It was a piece of paper, a note written by Malachi—she knew his handwriting as well as her own.

*Timing – Sarin implementation plan & final \$\$ transfer to SA account*

She read the words two more times, until they finally broke through her foggy mind.

“What?” was all she could say, as the air from her lungs was sucked out by some unseen force. The laundered clothes tumbled to the floor as she leaned forward, hands on her knees, begging for more oxygen, wishing what she'd seen was a figment of her imagination.

She had to confirm whether she was losing it mentally or about to lose it physically. She lifted herself to look at the note once more.

“You have a fascination with my bedroom, Beulah.”

“Ooh!” she blurted out as she hopped into the air. She looked over at Malachi standing in the threshold, one hand gripping Shiloh's neck. He dangled her small frame off the floor as if she were nothing more than an alley cat. She kicked and flailed her arms, but she did so with no more than a few quiet, desperate squeals. Horror rippled across her face, yet she didn't cry. It was as if her body had bypassed that response. Perhaps she was too fearful to cry.

“Do not hurt Shiloh, Malachi. Please.” She took a single step in his direction.

His ruthless gaze made her feel like she was two inches tall, but she couldn't back down. Not for Shiloh.

“Malachi, I'm sure we can talk this out. That's why we're here, to be a family, to support each other through good times and bad,” she said with as much compassion and care as she could muster.

He turned his head and looked at Shiloh, studying her as if she were more animal than human. Jerking his eyes back to Beulah, he said, “You have sinned in the eyes of the Lord...that I cannot help.”

“But we were just here to drop off your laundry, to complete one of the many chores that enables Camp Israel to run so smoothly, to carry out His work. Let us continue the goodwill, the acts of good faith. Would you like for us to join you in prayer down in the sanctuary?”

His blank stare screamed at her, yet he uttered no words. It went on for seconds, if not minutes, all while little Shiloh gasped a few feet away. Beulah

wanted to reach over and pluck her from his hand, to hold her and tend to the bruise that was surely on her neck. And then to try to tend to the bruise that had formed on the inside. One of many, no doubt.

Slowly, he shifted his cold glare a couple of feet to the top of the dresser. Had he seen her read the note?

Each time he blinked his eyes, Beulah's pulse doubled in speed. She could actually feel blood racing through her veins. Was this the early stages of a heart attack? She never felt so much stress...for her life, for Shiloh's. And yes, for everyone living in Camp Israel.

"Beulah, you will pay for your indiscretions. And Shiloh here will get a front-row seat so she can grow up to understand how women are supposed to act."

Malachi marched to the side of his bedroom, dragging Shiloh like a small doll. He grabbed a chair and moved it directly in front of the bed.

"Sit," he ordered Shiloh, who whimpered and reached for her neck as her butt landed on the chair with a thud.

He shut the door and used a key from his pocket to lock the deadbolt from the inside.

That was new.

Spinning on his heels, he looked at Beulah and pointed at the bed. Again, no words were spoken. She shook her head, her lips quivering, knowing what he had in store. But she couldn't move. Her legs wouldn't accept the signal from her brain that she had to give in.

Or did she?

Without thinking, she walked over to the door and turned the knob. The door didn't budge. Of course it didn't. It was locked. She had seen him do it, yet she couldn't keep her flight instincts from triggering her desire to leave. She gripped the knob harder and yanked with all her might, hoping the laws of physics would magically change. Tears began to pool in her eyes as she balled up her fists and started pounding on the door.

He cleared his throat, and she turned to find him standing behind Shiloh's chair, his veiny hands clutching each side of her head. Shiloh looked at her, confused.

Malachi smiled at Beulah. He was threatening to snap Shiloh's neck. She quickly dropped her fists and stepped away from the door, drawing an approving nod from her leader.

"Over there," he said, motioning with his head toward the bed. "Take your clothes off."

"In front of the child? Are you—" She bit her tongue until the metallic taste of blood coated her mouth.

He stood tall and pointed a single finger upward. "'If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name,' says the Lord Almighty, 'I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me.'"

She recognized the second verse of the second chapter from the book that bore his name. He had repeated the phrase many times during her thirty-two years at the camp.

Turning her gaze downward, she began to disrobe as Malachi pulled a rope from a drawer and tied Shiloh to the chair. Then he snapped off a piece of duct tape and sealed her mouth shut.

A moment later, a naked Malachi straddled Beulah in bed as he secured her wrists to the headboard. Then he had his way with her, over and over again. All the while, she stared not at Shiloh, but at the tears running down the cheeks of Jesus.

It was the only way.

For the second straight day, Archie and I gathered at Mel's Diner, just on the West Virginia side of its border with Virginia. I sat at the bar and took my time looking over the sticky, laminated menu while Archie sat in a booth, slurping another chocolate shake. From my vantage point, I could see this one had sprinkles.

He was happy as a clam, seemingly oblivious to the upcoming confrontation that could very well send the shake back up the same pipe it went down.

Just like the day before, the diner was brimming with action—waitresses and busboys hustling food and dirty plates back and forth to the kitchen, patrons pouring into the smallish establishment, sometimes one or two at time, and a few in packs of five or six. Just about everyone plowed into their meals while laughing and speaking at a high volume. It must have been a coveted event—a meal at Mel's diner. Given the thirty miles of separation the small eatery had from any town I knew of, I recalled the famous mantra of real estate types: it's all about location, location, location.

The cheap bell on the front door chimed, and within a few seconds I could hear the clip of hard-soled shoes walking past me. Those shoes were high end. Cole Haan perhaps. I slowly turned in my swivel chair to see Agent Vandiver scooting into the booth opposite Archie, who quickly wiped the chocolate mustache off his own mustache, sitting straight as if he were in the presence of a high-ranking military commander.

Bringing my menu with me, I slinked out of my chair and walked six steps before plopping down next to Archie.

"This was your plan?" he whispered.

I ignored Archie and held up the menu, then shifted my eyes to Vandiver, who just now was removing his sunglasses. "Given what I saw yesterday, I'd stay clear of the tuna melt, unless you want to be hugging a toilet the rest of the day."

Vandiver's face immediately went flush. "Woods, what the hell is going on here?"

Archie scooted away from me like I had cooties. "I...uh, I've never seen her before in my life."

I rammed my elbow into his rib cage. "You're really going to act that way?"

Archie's eyes went back and forth between Vandiver and me a couple of times. Then he covered his face with both hands. "Oh my, what have I gotten myself into?"

"Actually, that's a good question for Agent Vandiver."

The agent smacked his lips a couple of times, seemingly frustrated that he

was being interrogated. “I don’t have to respond to the likes of you. Woods, your ass is grass, and I’m a fucking lawn mower. With your security breach, you might have just flushed the toilet on this entire operation,” he said, his teeth clenched as he leaned forward.

“Calm down, Vandiver.”

He shifted his deep, recessed eyes toward me. “Don’t tell me to calm down. We’ve been after this group for three years. And now, motor mouth here has just fucked it up.”

“How?”

“Your employer might be the FBI, Troutt, but you might as well be a member of the KGB on this one. It’s not your business.”

“Are you afraid I’ll steal your thunder? What’s your issue?”

“I don’t have a fucking issue.”

I let that statement linger for a moment. A waitress appeared. “Oh, hi there.” It was Dana, and she was looking at Archie. “I just started my new shift, and I picked up your table. I see he has a shake. What can I get the two of you?”

Vandiver and I were in a stare-down. The veins at his temples were pulsating. Actually, he was the one making it a competitive exercise. I was merely standing up to the bully with the short fuse. But I had reason to prove some point. I wanted action.

I picked up the menu, scanned it quickly, and popped my finger about two-thirds down. “I’ll have the Cobb salad, Dana. And a coffee, along with some water.”

“And you?” Dana said to Vandiver, although I could see her trading winks with Archie. Did they have something going on more than just a flirtation? Damn, Archie was like a retired Kentucky Derby winner...nothing less than a stud with women lined up for his enjoyment. Or so it seemed.

“Umm...” Vandiver finally turned his sights to his own menu.

“Cheeseburger and fries. And a Coke with no ice.”

“Archie, anything for you, dear?”

“I’m good with just sucking on the teat...I mean milkshake.” He showed his teeth, which drew another wink from Dana before she walked off.

That only pissed off Vandiver that much more. “See what I mean? How this guy ever worked for the CIA....it’s a frickin’ miracle he kept his job as long as he did.”

Archie’s whole body slumped downward like he’d been kicked in the gonads.

“Vandiver, you’re crossing the line.”

“Stay out of it, Troutt.”

Now he was pissing me off. “Listen, you thick-headed Neanderthal, this guy here saved my life on more than one occasion and served this country better than most agents I’ve worked with.”

“Pfff.” Vandiver leaned back. He was blowing me off.

“Thanks, Alex,” Archie said. “But it takes respect to gain respect, my dad always said. If I’m not respected, I guess I’m done working with your agency.”

“It’s not mine. It’s his,” I said, pointing a finger at Vandiver.

Archie took out his wallet and opened it up. It was empty. Then he pulled out a credit card. “I’m ready to go. How about you?”

“Hold on,” Vandiver said just as Dana arrived with the food. She set the plates down and didn’t linger.

I sipped my coffee while Vandiver took a large bite from his burger.

“I might have been a bit hasty. I’m...you know.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Sorry?” Archie said with a raised brow.

“Yeah, that,” Vandiver said as he shoved more burger into his mouth. How long had it been since he’d eaten?

I nibbled on my salad. “I want this mission to be successful, Vandiver. I think we can help each other.”

He nodded while chewing his burger, then he downed a gulp of his Coke. “This operation has been so top secret that there’s only a handful of people who know about it.”

“Why?”

“This Camp Israel group has their tentacles everywhere, it seems. That’s the strange part. They live like they’re Amish, but somehow they have their ear to the ground. Any time we’ve pulled together more aggressive plans, they’re one step ahead of us. It’s been frustrating. We have some evidence that shows the leaders of this place might have been running a money scam for two decades or more. Which means tax evasion, fraud, and a whole list of crimes.”

“So that’s the tactic we’re using now on places like Camp Israel?”

“We?” he asked.

“Yes, we, the FBI. I might be on vacation, but I can see when the Bureau is running from its past.”

He took in a breath—finally—and then used his napkin to wipe the edges of his mouth. “To be frank, there’s some truth to that. Those of us who work in districts where this type of group exists have been told to tread very carefully. The PR can spin out of control faster than you can say FBI.”

“David Koresh and the Waco disaster,” I said.

“Exactly. It was a fucking fiasco. With all the media on site watching every little move we made, spreading rumors or lies, it was just...unworkable. Did you know that at one point a radio executive actually got on the horn and tried to negotiate a deal with Koresh and his top lieutenants? A radio guy.”

“What the hell does a radio guy know, other than turning a bunch of dials?” Archie asked.

Half-smiles all around the table, and the tension dropped a couple of degrees.

“So, I’m going to be transparent with you,” I said, fidgeting with my napkin. “It’s about my mom. There’s some evidence that suggests—”

Vandiver held up a hand. “I know.”

“How?”

His eyes shifted to Archie, who lifted his shoulders, then took another slurp of his milkshake.

“Thus, my apprehensions on his ability to maintain secrecy,” Vandiver said.

“Good point,” I said, as I turned and looked at Archie.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Can we move on?” Archie said.

I wasn’t finished, and I turned my attention back to Vandiver. “The question is, why haven’t you guys done anything about the allegations into the crazy shit going down at this camp? People held captive, women treated like slaves, rape...not just once, but repeatedly.”

Vandiver set his napkin down and sipped his Coke. “First, we did not have solid proof of what you describe.”

“Does the name Claudia Nesmith ring a bell?”

He paused in the middle of chewing for a quick second, his eyes trying to stay focused on his food.

“Claudia Nesmith,” I repeated.

Anchoring his elbows on the table, Vandiver just looked at me, nodding.

“Do I need to say the name again?”

“I think we’ve got it,” Archie said, patting my arm. I glanced over at him, and he quickly got the picture—I wasn’t in a touching mood.

Vandiver sighed. “It’s not what you think. We didn’t bury our heads in the sand. Not completely.”

I folded my arms on the table. “There’s more, right?”

“Look, I work out of a small satellite office in Clarksburg, under the umbrella of the Pittsburgh Division. My small team covers eighteen counties in total, including Tucker County where Camp Israel resides.”

He held up a finger to sip his Coke, or bide time to cover his tracks for ignoring the crimes at Camp Israel.

“I’ve only been in this position for about five months. Before that, the agent in charge, Prescott, was...kind of a bull in a china shop. He took a hardcore approach and didn’t like anyone getting in his way, whether that be management from another office, other law enforcement agencies, possible suspects, or even potential victims.”

“What are you trying to say?”

He pressed his lips together. “I guess since we’re all, more or less, on the same team, I can tell you this. Prescott and the rest of us had heard rumors of some of the things you described. The Pittsburgh office tried to come in and take over the investigation, but Prescott wouldn’t have it.”

“Who the hell was calling the shots?”

“I think Prescott just wore them down until they finally agreed to let him



run it, but they said he had to provide evidence of wrongdoing before any approval for search warrants or any type of confrontation.”

“Claudia was that proof.”

“It’s not as clean as you’d like to think.”

“Nothing is if you don’t want it to be.”

“I’ll ignore the dig, but when she disappeared, there was a lot of discussion, which led to arguments with family members and internally within the FBI about whether she left on her own volition. And because of who we were dealing with and the history of the Branch Davidians, no one took action because no one could show probable cause that a crime had been committed.”

Dana walked by and held up the carafe of coffee. My cup was still almost full, so I waved her off.

I couldn’t let it go. “But once Claudia escaped, wasn’t she your hammer to nail those bastards to the wall?”

Archie slurped up the last few drops of his shake, drawing derisive stares from me and Vandiver. “Like Alex said, why not pursue the case with Claudia?”

“That’s where Prescott really fucked up.”

“An admission of wrongdoing, finally. Let me give you a standing ovation,” I said.

“Do you want to know the truth or not?”

I flicked two fingers toward me. “Spit it out.”

“Prescott had the charisma of a bear. Everyone in the office knew it; we just had no clue why the Pittsburgh SAIC didn’t see it and move him out of the position. Maybe since Prescott was out of his immediate sight, it was easy for him to not think about him and the issue at Camp Israel”

“What happened?” Archie asked.

“Prescott set up a meeting with Claudia and her sister...”

“Hank.”

“Right, a boy’s name. Anyway, he apparently threw up all over her. Didn’t apologize for not recognizing she had been held captive, and even blamed her for not trying to collect any tangible evidence.”

“What an ass,” Archie said.

“The meeting went downhill from there. He actually seemed surprised that she wouldn’t cooperate after that.”

“Are you aware that she and Hank believe the leaders of this cult have essentially put out a hit on her and that she’s living in a secret location?”

He rubbed his forehead. “I’ve come to learn that, yes. But now we’re stuck. We can’t get the authority to pull together a significant operation without that proof, yet she won’t talk to us.”

“She doesn’t trust you...well, the FBI in general.”

“I know, I know. I’ve tried talking to Hank on four different occasions, and she wouldn’t budge. In some respects I don’t blame her. It’s just a big cluster.”

"I've talked to her."

His hand dropped to the table, and the plates rattled. "Claudia? How? When?"

"Within the last two days. She's scared as hell, but I convinced her that I would stand by her side every step of the way if she came forward."

"You turned her?"

"Kind of. She'll come forward if we can get one other person to come forward."

"Your mom."

I nodded. "Now you're connecting the dots."

"You're pretty smart, Alex," Archie said.

I subtly shook my head, signaling that now was not the time to hand out praise.

"But do you know for certain she's in that compound?" Vandiver asked.

"Claudia said she met a woman named Beulah. There is evidence that my mom went by that name. Claudia is almost certain the woman in this picture I have is the woman she saw."

"Can I see it?"

I handed it over, and within a couple of seconds, his brow furrowed.

"This picture must be..."

"Over forty years old. I know. But Claudia seemed pretty convincing."

Vandiver scratched his chin as he eyeballed another patron walking by our table.

"I'm not asking to take over your investigation—"

"Good, because that wouldn't happen. Or to put it politely, it would take a direct order from Washington."

"I only want to be kept in the loop and provide support. I've been around; maybe you could use me."

He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Archie. "Is she always this crafty?"

Archie turned his palms to the ceiling. "I plead the Fifth."

Vandiver rolled his eyes.

"So I understand you want to send Archie back in," I said.

"I do, yes. We didn't get much intel last time. Weather didn't cooperate. But I just wish we knew who shot at the two of you before we plan anything."

"No leads on your end?"

"With so few resources at my disposal, it's difficult. Plus, we don't want to run and show off a huge FBI presence. On top of that, I've got virtually no pull with local law enforcement. It's another trust issue." Vandiver rubbed his forehead again. He was clearly stressed.

"I've got my team back in Boston working to pull together the members and elders at the church near the motel. That's where we think the sniper was positioned."

"You've got a team working on this? I don't know whether to hug you or worry that you're putting the operation more at risk than Archie here."

Archie put an elbow on the sill and looked out the window, shaking his head. He'd get over it.

"I'll share whatever I get as soon as it comes in," I said, pulling out my phone. No new text messages or voicemails since we'd been in the diner.

Vandiver's face lit up. "Okay, cool. Thanks, Troutt."

"Alex, please," I said, placing the phone on the table.

Dana dropped by again. "Can I get these dishes out of the way?"

I looked at my salad. The lettuce was soggy, and I picked up a foul odor from the eggs on top. "It's all yours."

She grabbed my plate and Vandiver's plate, which only had crumbs on it. She then looked at Archie. "Want another, Arch? It can be on the house," she said with an alluring tone.

"Well..."

My phone buzzed and vibrated.

"A text from Gretchen," I said.

Was Dana looking over my shoulder? I glanced up. "We'll take the check."

"But what if I want another shake?" Archie actually stuck out his lower lip.

"How old are you?"

"Old enough," Dana said. I turned and found her wrinkling her nose at Archie the gigolo.

"We'll just take the check as soon as you can get it to us." I waited until she walked away, and then I read through the text.

"What does it say?" Vandiver obviously had my level of patience.

"Okay, so there are a hundred twenty-five members of the church, but only seven have keys, including a secretary who is eighty-nine years old."

"So I guess we're down to six," Vandiver said.

"There's more," I said, thumbing the screen up. "Here are the names of the six people. The pastor, the music director, and four elders. All men."

"Big surprise," Vandiver said.

I could feel warm air on my neck. "Can you give me some breathing room?" I asked.

Archie pointed at the screen and opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"What is it?"

He started choking, then grabbed my water and downed what was left in the glass, although a fair amount spilled down his shirt. Even after he set the empty glass on the table, his breaths came out as if he'd just run a marathon in the West Virginia mountains.

"Archie, are you having a panic attack?"

He shook his head, but still wouldn't talk.

"Are you sure?"

Now he nodded, then a few seconds later he shook his head.

“Dammit, Archie, get it together. You act like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “You remember Felicia?”

“The girl from the barn?”

Vandiver’s eyes narrowed. “What girl from the barn?”

Archie shrugged sheepishly. “You told me to take every opportunity I had to get close to the people in the community, right?”

He nodded once. “What did you do now?”

Archie mumbled while glancing away.

Vandiver looked at me. “Can you interpret this guy?”

“From what I could tell when he butt-dialed me, he was pretending to be a veterinarian.”

“Sounds creative, but what did that get you?”

Another mumble, so I jumped in. “The girl’s ass on a silver platter.”

“So you used your position to screw this girl?”

Archie finally turned his head to look at Vandiver. “I thought she might know more about what was going on at Camp Israel.”

“What’s her last name, Archie?” Vandiver asked.

“Spooner. Felicia Spooner.”

I held my gaze. “Seriously?”

“Did I tell you she had big feet?”

I had already turned to look at the names on the phone. “Clarence Spooner, elder.”

“Crap!” Vandiver shouted, drawing annoyed and curious glares from those sitting in the adjoining booths.

“Tell me you didn’t share anything with her about your undercover assignment?” I barked.

“I didn’t share a thing.” He held up two fingers—the Boy Scout promise.

Skeptical, I tilted my head. “No war stories about your great CIA conquests where you did your best Jason Bourne impersonation?”

His lips drew a straight line. “Okay, to be honest, I kind of lost myself... right at that special moment,” he said, popping a fist into the palm of his other hand.

“You’re gross.”

“I don’t remember saying anything, Vandiver. I was the ultimate legend.”

“Legend, my ass.” Vandiver wiped his face.

“You gotta believe me. You do believe me, right? I don’t want to go to jail.”

Dana arrived with the check and then just stood there. She was waiting for the money. I reached for my purse, but Vandiver beat me to it. “I can expense this one.” He gave her plastic, and she sauntered away, but not before she got in another wink to Archie.

Vandiver leaned forward. “The attempt on your lives means we’re close to something big. I can feel it.”

“So the last thing we can afford is to back away and play the waiting

game,” I said, encouraging a certain direction.

“We’d already set in motion another issue with their electrical power today,” he said. “But it’s a risk. Possibly a huge risk. The whole point of this is to not be confrontational and try to get the evidence we need without a blood bath on either side.”

“James, let me back in there, man.” Archie poked a hairy finger onto the table. “I can do it. Now that I’ve been there once, I have a better idea of where to go, how to move around. What do you say?”

Vandiver nodded.

Archie placed his hands in front of his face and looked straight at the FBI agent. “I won’t let you down.”

Then he turned in his seat, his face no more than a foot from mine. “And trust me, Alex. I won’t let you down either.”

Trust Archie? Suddenly I felt like I was going to vomit.

Archie had explicit instructions from the two *real* electricians to run out to the truck and grab two tools. By the time he reached the door of the small shed that housed the main electrical box, his mind had already scrambled the request. He had no clue what gibberish had spilled from their mouths. Something about a V and a stripper. But he was damn sure he wouldn't find either of them in the truck.

He snorted out a brief chuckle, then covered his mouth as he turned back around. Donny and Norm were knee deep in wires, trying to solve whatever issue the FBI had concocted. While they were aware that Archie was affiliated with the FBI, they had no idea that all the tools in the world wouldn't resolve this issue. The local FBI brain trust had ensured as much.

Stepping outside he saw the last glimmer of sun dip below the trees, the rest of the sky painted in gun-metal gray. A heavy gust of wind shifted his thick head of hair—the feeling was strange to him; very few things could shift his hair. As he walked toward the truck, a spotlight positioned off the corner of a compound building nearly blinded him. He held his hand up to his eyes and squinted to look at the four main buildings. Only a handful of the windows were softly illuminated. The compound was running at a reduced electrical capacity on fuel-powered generators, or so he'd been told. They seemed to have a backup plan for just about everything.

How long would the fuel last? As temperatures dipped more below freezing each night, heat would become a precious commodity. He reached the truck, his eyes making note of the spindly, jagged shadows cutting across the rooftop. Trees, so many trees, all around the compound, up and down the hill in which the buildings were slotted like Lego blocks. There was something eerie about how the leafless tree limbs appeared to be reaching out, ready to gouge a passerby, or maybe even pluck them off the surface and devour them whole.

“Jesus, Arch, the countless Harry Potter weekend movie binges have got you all freaked out. Chill, dude.” He acknowledged that talking to himself had become a mainstay in his life, just like his endless search for the perfect woman—a friend for life, a soul mate with whom he could connect.

He let out another snort. Where did that line of emotional bullshit come from? He was all about chasing ass, even at his advanced middle age. Although he knew he didn't look a day older than twenty-eight. Yep, old Arch was still in his prime. He could wait a while before settling down to the boring life, a house full of brats and a bitchy wife. Maybe in another ten years...if they were lucky.

Behind the front seat, he rummaged through the blue toolbox, searching for something that would make him think about a V and a stripper. He

couldn't help but smile. He then noticed two other toolboxes, one red and the other gray. *They did say the blue toolbox, right?*

Crap.

"Fuck it." He blindly picked up a hand tool with a yellow grip and tiny rivets down the side of the metal and stuffed it in his coat pocket. His finger brushed against the flash drive he'd brought. How in the hell would he be able to find a computer in this massive complex without being caught? His gut twisted into a knot, wondering if he had over-sold his capabilities...again.

He took in a breath and shut the door, thinking through what story he could use if he got caught meandering through one of the main buildings. Maybe he'd wing it, like he had so many other times in his life. He walked back to the shed, opened the door, and tossed the tool to Donny.

"What's this?" He held the tool with two fingers, as if it were contaminated with some deadly coating.

"The V stripper thingy. Gotta find a restroom. I need to go...bad," he said, closing the door just as Donny said something to the effect of "What the hell?"

Archie walked toward the dark side of the large, two-story, rectangular building to his left, near the line of trees at the back of the camp's main area. Steam pumped from his mouth with each breath, disappearing into the darkening sky. Kind of reminded him of one of his first awesome Christmas presents as a kid: a toy locomotive that somehow produced a tiny swirl of gray smoke as it raced around the figure-eight track. Thinking back, that shit was probably toxic and now banned in every country across the world.

Reaching the back of the building, he rested his hand on the stucco siding and peeked around the corner. Nestled in between four bushy evergreens, he spotted a small structure. He didn't recall seeing this building on Alex's phone earlier, nor on his previous visit. A surge of adrenaline made his fingertips tingle. Or were his hands starting to freeze? He blew warm air into his hands and noticed a single yellow light above a door. No windows that he could see, but he didn't have the best sightline, and the building was a good hundred feet away. One quick glance over his shoulder, and he stepped toward the unknown building, all of his senses on high alert.

An owl hooted, and he spun around to face the trees. Nothing more than a spider web of branches. *Hold it...something moved.* He leaned that way, narrowing his eyes. Then, with a quick burst, an owl propelled into the sky, soaring over his head and out of sight.

Releasing a breath, he turned his focus back to the building and continued to move closer. He shifted his weight to walk on his toes—anything to reduce any audible hint of his presence. Twenty feet away he noticed a small windowpane about the size of his hand built into the door. Perfect.

He tiptoed one more step...and the door opened. He froze for a split second—he was in no-man's-land. He lowered his body and dove to his left. Digging his fingers into wet leaves, he lifted his head and saw a branch from

one of the evergreens. He had a bit of cover. Was it enough?

"I appreciate all of your extra work, Levi. Truly, you are a testament to all the other AFGs," a man's voice said.

Peering between the branches, Archie saw two men standing outside the door. "Thank you, Jamin. Coming from you, it means a great deal."

Of the two, this one was tall, over six feet, with golden hair. He still had a baby face. He couldn't have been much older than eighteen.

"I know I still have a lot to learn. How to serve better, how to be more humble."

The other man, Jamin, put a hand on Levi's shoulder. Jamin was older and shorter, shaped like a pear, with shoulders that hunched forward.

*Some of these biblical names sound like jeans,* Archie thought.

"So many people on this planet have not seen the light like you have, Levi."

Levi released an awkward smile, stuffing his oversized hands into his pockets.

Jamin held up a single finger. "Serving is what this is all about. The message that Malachi has delivered ever since he was guided by the Lord to establish Camp Israel."

"I've seen a lot of people serving and helping the cause in different ways," Levi said.

Archie couldn't tell if the kid was sucking up or just naively following the older man's direction. It was obvious this Jamin character was one of the main guys. And the way he described Malachi's position sounded as if this Malachi might be the ringleader of the whole group.

Would have been nice for Vandiver to share more information. Archie had been on plenty of missions during his stint with the CIA, and he knew firsthand that information was king. The more the better, especially if he had to go undercover. He recalled one such mission that involved tracking a Russian diplomat to a brothel in Nevada.

*Get it together, Arch. Focus on the here and now.*

"I'm glad you see it, Levi. Others, I'm not so sure about," Jamin said, turning around, looking up toward the sky in Archie's direction. Archie went stiff, hoping the man hadn't seen his gray jacket.

"What do you mean, Jamin?"

"Well, Malachi and I are growing concerned," he said, turning around to face the kid again. "There are some in this group who have allowed the Devil to enter their hearts."

The kid scrunched his eyes together. "I...I don't know what to say."

"It's okay, Levi. Malachi, Ezra, me, and the core group, we will always be here for you and those who follow the path of our mission: to live a holy life, and to spread that word and our values globally."

Levi nodded. "It's not just our mission, it's our passion."

Jamin chuckled. "I know that's part of the script you and the other AFGs



read, but it sounds like you believe it in here.” He touched his chest.

“I do, Jamin. I truly believe it’s why I’ve been put on this earth.”

A smile stretched across Jamin’s face, and even in the reduced light, Archie could see trenches form on the sides of the older man’s mouth.

“What an example you are, Levi. I’m going to talk to Malachi to see how we can reward you for all of your work.”

“There’s really no need, sir. I have everything I want right here at Camp Israel.”

Jamin squeezed the boy’s shoulder. “Very well. What do you say we go in and have some hot chocolate?”

They took a couple of steps until Levi stopped and held up his hand. “Don’t I need to lock up the Center?”

Archie wondered, *The center of what?* “Again, you think of everything, Levi. After our hot-chocolate break I need to run a couple of reports to share with Malachi. I want him to see the good work you and the others have done this past week.”

The pair walked toward a different door at the rear of the building, one Archie hadn’t noticed at first. Once it banged shut, Archie paused for a brief moment, replaying the conversation he’d just heard. What the hell were AFGs? And why did that Levi fellow talk like he was reading from a script?

Archie pushed to a standing position, checked all around and then walked to the door of the small structure. He peeked inside and saw no one else, so he slowly turned the knob and walked inside, quickly scanning the room. Computer monitors, phones, and headsets. Eight separate workstations, four on each side of the wall. He shuffled deeper into the room and noticed tower computers under each of the workstations, which were no more than three feet wide with glass partitions separating each one.

The computers released a soft humming noise.

At the far end of the room sat a simple metal desk, another monitor, and a laptop. He walked around and jiggled the mouse to wake up the computer. The black screen came to life, but it was locked. His eyes didn’t blink. The image on the screen’s wallpaper showed a man with great intensity standing next to a lectern. He wore a ripped T-shirt and held a Bible high in the air. Two women were on their knees in front of him with their heads bowed. His muscles rippled across his exposed chest and shoulders.

Was that Malachi, the person Jamin had spoken about with such reverence? For the first time, Archie got a sense of the level of deception going on at Camp Israel. He replayed the words from the naïve kid, Levi: “It’s not just our mission, it’s our passion.” He’d read plenty about groups of people being brainwashed by their leaders. Jim Jones. David Koresh. But something about this Malachi and Jamin duo seemed to take it to an entirely different level.

And to make matters even more bizarre, Alex’s mom was involved with this group. *What kind of crazy woman does Alex have as a mom?* Biting into

his chapped lip, Archie knew he didn't have the knowledge to break through the security, certainly not very quickly. But he didn't think it would be necessary. He pulled out the flash drive and slipped it into the port on the side of the laptop. Vandiver told him he needed to keep it in one of the computers for two minutes in order for the program to load properly. He put his phone on a two-minute timer, then glanced to his right—another door, barely discernible with its beige color and matching frame blending in with the wall. He took a step closer and read a small handwritten sign on it: Server Room.

He opened it and saw racks of servers and cables. "Impressive," he whispered to himself. The room was illuminated only by the flashing orange, green, and red lights from the purring machines all around him. There must have been thirty or more such boxes, cables and wires running everywhere. But it didn't seem cluttered or disorganized. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact.

Archie rubbed his mustache, trying to make sense of it all.

He heard the door in the main room open.

*Fuck!*

Turning quickly, he saw the flash drive still in the laptop. He slowly brought the server room door toward him, without making the extra noise to shut it all the way. With his sights focused on the door, he backpedaled deeper into the room that held the technology guts for Camp Israel. Surrounded by racks and servers on both sides, he retreated until he felt the back wall with his hand.

He heard a person's voice. It was loud, but he couldn't make out the words. It sounded like Jamin, the old guy. It had to be, right? A few seconds passed and Archie felt lightheaded. He'd forgotten to breathe. He released a lungful of air and tried to think through his options.

What options? He was screwed with a capital S.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Wait, his phone. He could call Norm or Donny to distract Jamin away from this so-called Center. He reached into his pocket. Empty. Where was the —Shit!

He must have left it next to the computer. He rammed his fist into his head three quick times, telling himself he was a fucking idiot.

Then, like an angel sent from above, his hand on the wall felt something metal. Using the glow of the flashing server lights, he turned and saw an inverted metal door handle. He felt the seam around the door. It was smaller than the average-sized door, maybe four feet high, a couple of feet wide, as if it had been put in place after the building had been constructed.

A means of escape to the outside? He hoped so.

He might be able to get out of this predicament without being caught *and* provide Vandiver access to the group's cyber footprint. He could erase all of his debt and stay out of prison. Hallelujah!

A second before turning the door handle, he paused. Could an alarm

system be hooked into this door? He ground his teeth, agonizing over what to do. Had Jamin noticed the server room door was slightly ajar? Had the man not seen the flash drive or Archie's phone? If he had seen something, wouldn't he have opened the door and confronted Archie?

If the man hadn't noticed anything, that meant Archie could just wait it out in the server room. Until when, though? After Jamin and Levi locked up? How long would that be? And he couldn't recall the front door's locking mechanism.

Double shit!

He stared at the metal door handle, almost daring himself to open it. But he couldn't be stupid about it.

"Looking for something?"

Archie flipped around. It was Jamin, standing in the doorway, the blinking lights illuminating a grin so wide and mangled with jagged teeth, he didn't look human. More like a vampire.

"I...uh," was all Archie could think of saying, his feet seemingly stuck in quicksand.

"I believe this is your phone?" Jamin dangled the phone between his thumb and forefinger.

"I guess it fell out of my pocket. Ha-ha." Geez, he sounded like an idiot... again.

Jamin's grin folded up, hiding his fangs, but his scowl could have melted flesh.

Archie took a hard swallow, his mind racing with a thousand thoughts, but none clear enough to make any sense. Should he attack this old guy? Jamin had no weapon...at least none that Archie could see. Or should he just run like hell? But if the door was armed with an alarm system, the Mounties might jump him within a minute of making it outside.

Jamin slowly raised his other hand to his ear. He had a phone of his own.

"I've got him cornered," Jamin said into his cell phone.

"The hell you do. Look!" Archie pointed over Jamin's shoulder. The old guy actually took the bait and turned to look behind him. That was when Archie twisted the handle and jammed his body into the door.

His first step was all air, and he tumbled to the ground, a good two feet lower than what he'd anticipated. Didn't matter now. He jumped to his feet and started running, but quickly saw...nothing. Limbs reached out and snagged his coat, slapped his face. He saw nothing but the star-lit sky above him as he ran through the cluster of trees and brush. A limb shot up his nose, and he smacked it away. Gross!

Then it hit him. He was running *away* from the compound, in the opposite direction of the shed, Norm and Donny, and the truck. Did he expect to run into the hilly wilderness and then somehow use his navigational skills to figure out a way to find civilization and then call Vandiver and Alex?

He stopped for a moment.

But it was only a moment.

Whistles blared and flashlights splashed against the tree trunks and branches. He bolted out of his stance, back into a dead run in no time. There was no way these farmer boys could keep up with him. He'd lose them in the forest, and then he could figure out a way to live until daylight. That moment of optimism vanished a second later when another wave of whistles and flashlights came at him from two o'clock.

"Crap!" he muttered, quickly cutting left.

And then the ground disappeared. He fell down a steep hill, his body falling over itself two, three, four times. Would it ever stop? A tree took a chunk out of his shoulder during one of the somersaults, but it hardly slowed his spiraling fall. Along the way, dirt and sticks found their way into every crevice in his body. It didn't end until he rammed into something hard at the bottom of the hill.

"Fuck," he moaned, turning over and feeling around him. He felt a tarp under his fingertips, and he tugged to pull himself up. He felt a lump forming on his head as he got to his knees and reached out a hand as voices grew louder and a flurry of flashlights found him. Part of the tarp had been pulled off a crate. Sitting next to it was a large canister.

"Stop right there," a man ordered him from behind.

But Archie's eyes focused on the bold words etched on the canister.

Danger: Sarin Gas

And then it became all too clear for Archie. He knew what was about to go down at Camp Israel.

I had my cell phone set to speaker as it rested in the palm of my hand. Leaning closer to the laptop screen, I had to adjust myself, yet again, on the tiny stool.

Vandiver said, “Those things are worse than sitting your bony ass on a wooden pew in church as a kid. But I guess I’ve put some meat on my bones since then, so these miniature stools don’t bother me much.”

He chuckled. I chose not to assess the size of my ass, even if half of it was hanging off the chair. I couldn’t complain, not since we were finally in mission mode, supporting Archie and the electrical crew inside Camp Israel from the back of a white FBI van, otherwise known as a Mobile Telecommunications Command Center, or MTCC.

“I’m not seeing the data,” Gretchen said from the speakerphone.

“Hold on,” Vandiver replied, then he moved over to another keypad and punched in a code of some kind. “Gotta have ten levels of security if you work for the government.”

Another screen built into the wall panel lit up and then hundreds of lines of numbers and letters scrolled down the screen. Archie had apparently been able to insert the flash drive into a networked computer. Data started flooding in.

“Gretchen,” Vandiver said, “I think we’ve got the connection set up now. You should be receiving data, which should create a virtual trail for you to start gathering intel on our suspects.”

“I can see it now. Thanks. I’ll start working on it.”

Vandiver turned to me. “I appreciate being able to use your team. My tech guy is working another case down in Boone County.”

“Boone,” I said quietly.

“Let’s keep the line open, Gretchen,” Brad said over the speaker. “Nick and I are huddled up in that conference room near your cube at the office.”

“Yeah, sorry I couldn’t stick around. Just got this new dog, and he would destroy my new place if I didn’t get home. He’s chewing on a bone and sitting on Brandon’s lap on the couch.”

I could practically see Nick roll his eyes. Kind of wished he and Brad were here with me.

“Gretchen, if you find any piece of evidence at all that might take you down another rabbit trail, hand it off to Nick and Brad,” I chimed in.

“I was just about to say the same thing.” Nick’s voice sounded garbled.

“You feeling okay, partner?”

I could hear Brad snicker. “Your so-called partner just took a second bite of something that spilled all over his shirt. And I gotta say, it’s stinking up the whole office. Wow, dude.”

“It’s called a [salmon sashimi with blue cheese and white miso puree](#), thank you very much.”

I heard lips chomping on food.

“We’re here for the long haul, Alex. Anything you need,” Nick said.

“As a matter of fact...” Brad’s voice trailed off for a moment, then, “I’ve finally got some data back on our two favorite deacons whose trails became cold in Ohio.”

Vandiver paused for a second, joining me as I listened more intently.

“You have our attention, Brad.”

“Both of them had their names formally changed through the court system there in West Virginia.”

Vandiver jumped in. “Don’t tell me, biblical names.”

“You guessed it. Malachi and Jamin.”

“Those are two on the list we’ve documented from various folks around town who have interacted with members of Camp Israel. They’ve been on our short list of folks who might be in charge of the camp,” Vandiver said.

“So while we technically still have a gap in time for Malachi and Jamin, we’re slowly filling it in with more information,” Brad added.

I strummed my fingers on the small counter as Brad continued. “In case you’re wondering, I did a little research. The name Jamin means right hand. And the name Malachi means my messenger or my angel.”

“Have you found any recent pictures of Malachi and Jamin?” I asked.

“Still searching. I’ll let you know. Once again, we’re on this until the end.”

The end. I couldn’t envision what that looked like at this point.

An electronic chirping noise pierced my ears. “What is that?”

“Got a call coming into the MTCC,” Vandiver said, moving to his right and reading a dial. He punched a green button on his panel. “Vandiver here.”

“This is Norm. We’re on our way out. Couldn’t fix the problem, but I guess you guys know that, right?”

“I appreciate you helping us out,” Vandiver said.

“Yes, thank you,” I added.

I wasn’t sure Norm heard either of us. “Yeah, and we’re being escorted off the property. Dude in a truck is right behind us. Probably up until we get through their front gate and onto the main road.”

Vandiver pointed at the GPS signal on the laptop screen. “Yep, we see you moving west. Glad you’re safe, even if you’re being escorted. Archie, nice work on getting the program run on their computer.”

“That’s what I was just going to mention,” Norm continued. “It’s just me and Donny. This big, hairy guy named Ezra came into the shed while we were working, telling us Archie had said he would need to stay there until the electrical problem was resolved. Donny and I knew that was our signal to get the hell out of that place.”

“Crap,” Nick said through my cell phone. “Now we’ve got one of our

own being held hostage. Just what we need right now.”

“Hey, you’re still paying us double for this work, right?” Norm asked.

“Yes, we’ll still hold to our agreement.”

“Cool. Mum’s the word on our end,” Norm said. “Hope your mission impossible works out okay.”

The line clicked dead. Vandiver didn’t move, just stared off into space.

“Are you guys still on the line?” Brad asked.

“We’re here,” Vandiver said, then he pursed his lips and shook his head. I could tell he was steamed.

“You’re thinking Archie screwed up,” I said.

“He’s being held hostage, Alex. Of course he screwed up. I should have known this was going to happen. What else could have happened? It’s Archie Woods we’re talking about. Mother—” He bit into his lower lip and set his elbow on the counter so hard it shook the keyboard. “How the hell am I going to explain this one to Pittsburgh...shit, to DC?”

“Don’t tell them. Not yet anyway.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I have to tell them. An FBI contractor is being held hostage, Alex.”

“Then let me go in after him.”

He closed his eyes as muffled sounds came through the phone.

“Alex, you can’t do that,” Nick said. “No way. Not alone. Not without a tactical squad alongside you and a plan in place.”

Vandiver jumped in before I could respond. “And you think the brass would be okay with a tactical operation on this camp when we have no evidence of weapons on the property?”

“I’d bet my left arm they’ve got more firepower than all the police and sheriff departments in the three surrounding counties,” I said.

“Proof. We need proof,” Vandiver said, smacking one hand into the other. “On top of that, this Ezra person didn’t come right out and say, ‘We’re holding Archie hostage.’ He gave a lame excuse about ensuring the electrical situation is resolved before they let him go.”

“You guys are controlling the power going into that camp, right?” Nick said, a hint of agitation in his voice.

“Yep.”

“Then turn that shit back on.”

I heard muffled voices in the background again as Vandiver and I locked eyes.

“I know what you’re thinking, Alex.”

“What?”

“Given that they might very well know Archie is working for the Feds, this could turn into one of those prolonged standoffs. And who knows what might happen over a week, four weeks, or even four months?”

I nodded, knowing he was taking this down a certain path.

“I can read your mind. You’re thinking this might be the only chance

you've got to get inside and get your mother out."

"And Archie too," I added.

"Even that dumbass too."

He stopped talking, his fist propping up his chin.

More noise from the phone. It sounded like Jerry's voice.

"I can do this, Vandiver. I've got the training, and I understand the sensitivity of the situation. I know we can't afford a shootout and a bunch of dead people."

He scratched his chin and looked at the phone. "I want to, Alex. I really do. But—"

"Remember what Claudia told me. That camp is a cesspool of criminal behavior. Rape, incest, abuse..." My breathing was becoming more rapid along with my heart rate. I released a lungful of air to avoid hyperventilating, then continued. "Archie's not the only one being held against his will. This isn't the nineteenth century. Slavery isn't still legal, right?"

"Alex, come on. Get real." Vandiver kneaded his forehead, his eyes closed. He was on the fence about the decision, which meant I was halfway there.

Just as I was about to add another point to my case, I heard from my cell phone what sounded like a car door shutting, then the revving of an engine. I ignored it for now.

"James, don't make me get sentimental on you, or ask you about your mother...what you would do to save her."

"I get it, and I would move mountains for my saintly mother, God rest her soul." He crossed himself. "But I've known my mom for my entire life. She's been there each step of the journey. Not to be cruel, but what if your mom is inside, and then you find her. Euphoria, right? Well, what if she's so brainwashed that she doesn't want to leave or, even worse, that she turns you in to the camp leaders? And then I've got two agents being held hostage."

I could feel my jaw start to tighten. The local FBI chief made a valid point. But I'd traveled over thirty years of my life without a mom, without feeling the unwavering, unconditional love that I'd naturally provided for Luke and Erin. And, oddly enough, I had this sensation that Mom was searching for the same thing in return, *if* she were still alive. *If* she actually lived in that camp.

Lifting from my seat, I attempted to stretch my back and nearly bumped my head on the van's roof.

"You're thinking about going in there alone if I don't give you the green light, aren't you?" Vandiver had both elbows on his knees, his furrowed brow pulling his eyes closer together.

"It's a free country, Vandiver. I like to hike, get in a good workout. Who knows where that could take me?"

"I could arrest you right here and now. Put handcuffs on you and wait until the horde of agents get here."



“And I could kick your ass right here and now,” I said, wondering if he was serious, and fully prepared if he was.

He started shaking his head again and blew out a disgusted breath. “Dammit, Alex. You’re killing me with this.”

I heard another voice over the speakerphone, like someone else had joined Nick and Brad.

“Guys, do we have another visitor?” I couldn’t afford for my extracurricular activities to become public knowledge, especially within the FBI.

Then I heard the sound of wind blowing, followed by a vacuum noise. “Guys?”

“Sorry, just going through security at Logan,” Brad said.

My eyes widened, and I looked at Vandiver.

“Alex, we’re coming down to help you,” Nick said. “We’ll be on an FBI jet in fifteen minutes.”

“How did you get this past Jerry?”

“Jerry is the one who told us to get our asses down there,” Nick said.

Brad jumped in. “He told us if we gave a damn about you, we wouldn’t just sit there and pick lint off our coats. Then he said to get our asses down there and he would deal with the consequences later.”

“Damn,” I said, suddenly at a loss for more words. But Vandiver wasn’t.

“You got your SSA’s approval to conduct a search-and-rescue mission on private property without a warrant?”

Brad and Nick were giving each other directions, then Nick finally said, “Jerry walked in on us, and I told him everything. Just put it all out there. He said he’d take the heat and play stupid until sunrise.”

Sounded like Jerry.

Brad added, “He told us to be safe and to not make him look bad.”

I couldn’t help but feel comforted by their acts of kindness. Got me a little choked up. “I don’t know what to say, guys. Thank you.”

“Alex,” Gretchen chimed in from her home base, “you know I’d be there if I could, or should. But I’m better off here, doing my research on this data. I’ve already got a pot of coffee brewing. I’m on this all night. And by sunrise we’ll have a solid trail on the pair, Malachi and Jamin.”

I looked at Vandiver. “She will come through. She always does. And that will give us more evidence.”

He huffed out a breath and opened his palms. “This place will be crawling with FBI and ATF agents within two hours of me making the call.” He turned and clicked his mouse a few times, then checked the time on his watch.

“You’ve got until sunrise.”

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It was ten minutes past three in the morning, and snowflakes as large as ping-pong balls were dropping from the sky.

Brad eyed me and then Nick, and then proceeded to use long-handled wire cutters to snap the middle barbed wire on the fence surrounding Camp Israel. He made one more snip six feet to the right, providing just enough room for Nick and me to scoot between the highest and lowest wires without snagging our black jackets. Once I got to the other side, I shined the tiny flashlight up ahead and saw nothing but hillside, trees, and falling snow.

“Alex,” Brad said from behind me.

I turned and saw his hand reaching across the wires. I took hold. Our grip wasn’t gentle; it was strong and empowering.

“Do you want to take a trip over the Christmas break...just you, me, and the kids?” he asked.

“You’re asking me this now?” I chuckled.

“Let’s go,” Nick said, a few steps in front of me.

I swept my flashlight across his face. “One second.”

“Yeah, now,” Brad said. “I want you to have something to look forward to. And to not forget what you mean to Luke and Erin.” He paused. “And to me too.”

I kissed the top of his hand, held it against my cold cheek. “I can’t forget. I...you mean everything to me.”

I could just make out his dimpled smile and the wink of his eye. “Be safe.”

“Always.”

“I’ll be listening.” He pointed at his ear, then jogged back over to the four-wheeler that brought the three of us to the northeast corner of Camp Israel, where the terrain was the most difficult, but where Vandiver felt certain we could enter the hundred-acre property unabated.

So far, he’d been right.

I flipped around and wondered where Nick had gone. I swept my flashlight left and right, but saw nothing more than huge snowflakes, pine needles, and tree trunks. I then punched the button on the back of my earpiece.

“Nick,” I whispered loudly.

“Over here,” he said from off to my left. A second later, his head appeared from the other side of a tree. “Nature called. You ready to roll?”

I nodded and angled my flashlight directly in front of us, pointing downward. I was still in amazement that Vandiver had no night-vision goggles at his disposal. Hell, I knew I could find two pairs at one of a dozen stores back in Boston. But as Vandiver reminded me, we were decades away from Boston.

As Nick and I slowly cut across the hill, maneuvering in and around trees and other wild brush, I felt like we were even on technology support. On the negative side, roaming the woods with flashlights put us in danger of people seeing us long before we would see them. We were hoping the camp leaders wouldn’t have anyone positioned in the woods as a lookout, and once we

picked up a visual of the buildings, then we would have to pocket the flashlights and use our bare eyes.

But the one positive was helpful. I asked Nick to validate the comm device in his ear.

“Can you read me?” he asked, then he tripped and fell onto his knees, blurting out a nice string of expletives.

“You can take the man out of Boston, but you can’t take Boston out of the man,” I said, noting the stump that had caused his fall. I stepped over it and went to his side to help him up.

“You okay, old man?”

“Screw you. I’m not old. Getting better, wiser with time. Like a fine wine,” he said, brushing off wet leaves and needles as he stood up and flexed his knee.

“Did you hurt it...your knee?”

“I’m fine. By the way, I’m a Brooklyn man, not a Boston man.”

“How could I forget it with that accent?”

We pushed forward another hundred feet, and just before a small clearing, we stopped behind three prickly bushes. I pulled my phone from a zipper pocket, right next to my three extra clips of ammo. I opened an app I’d downloaded back in the MTCC van and watched the circle spin. This was Vandiver’s other surprise. Without Archie knowing, he had inserted a GPS chip into Archie’s watch, realizing it was too easy to lose a phone or have it confiscated. That gave us a huge advantage in figuring out where Archie was being held. The app was good within five feet.

A blue dot flashed across the tiny screen.

“Moving in the right direction,” I said to Nick, knowing that both Brad and Vandiver could hear us through the earpiece.

We forged ahead, my eyes on the lookout for anything that moved. Vandiver had said it wasn’t uncommon to run across coyotes, opossums, deer, black bears, and in small hidden caves, any number of bats.

“You see anything on four legs?” I asked Nick, who was positioned about twenty feet to my left.

“Nothing so—”

Something bolted out of the darkness just in front of us. I went for my Glock in my shoulder holster, but fumbled with the flashlight. I had no visual confirmation on what was out there...or who.

I could hear four-legged clomps pounding the surface as I moved my handgun to eye level and finally gripped the flashlight. I swept left and picked up the back end of a white-tailed deer as it pranced deeper into the woods up the hill.

“Holy shit, look at that thing move!” Nick said.

“If your blood wasn’t flowing before, I guess it is now,” I said.

“I almost shot him, Alex. That would have alerted anyone on the mountain, human or animal,” he said, breathing heavily.

“Glad you kept it under control.”

Over a ridge and then down another hundred feet, we could see a few lights blinking between trees in the distance. I motioned for Nick to cut off the flashlight. I pocketed mine in one of the side pockets of my cargo pants.

We started being more precise about our movements, finding cover after every few steps.

“Might have cameras out this far. Or might even have patrols out searching the grounds,” I whispered as we both lay flat on the ground behind a fallen, half-rotted tree.

Just then, I saw the outline of a tall man walking around the corner of a long, rectangular building. “Is he holding a gun?”

“I can’t tell. I’m not even sure it’s a man. Looks like Sasquatch,” Nick said.

“I wonder how many others are out here that we can’t see.”

“Dammit, we really could use some night-vision goggles,” Nick said.

I motioned for him to follow me, and we zigged and then zagged, edging ahead until we could see the back part of the compound down the hill from us. I checked the GPS app on my phone. It took about thirty seconds, but the blue dot finally started flashing.

“Building on the right, about a quarter of the way down. But we can’t determine if he’s on the first or second floor.”

Nick didn’t waste time, moving down the hill at a good pace. We each found a tree and waited. I hadn’t noticed it before, but a small building was about twenty feet in front of the large building where we thought Archie was. It was surrounded by large evergreen trees. We stepped to the back of what looked like a one-room structure. No windows.

I motioned for Nick to go around the other way; we’d meet at the front entrance, which faced the larger building. With my back against the wall, I scooted down the side wall, my Glock held tightly against my chest. As I reached the front, I quickly poked my head around. I saw Nick on the other side. He pointed at the light emanating from the small window. The door opened, and we both pulled back.

I heard boots crunching through leaves, walking away from us. I edged forward and saw a pear-shaped man, older, his hair thin. He carried a backpack over his shoulder on the path to the large building thirty feet from us. As the door shut behind him, Nick and I quickly stepped toward each other and looked inside the smaller structure. It was void of people, but not of machinery. Scattered all over the floor were broken remnants of what looked like computer screens, phones, keyboards, and at least one laptop. “Messy operation,” Nick whispered. Then he flipped around and kept an eye out for any unwanted party.

I didn’t want to waste our time inspecting the inside of the building, but it seemed like the room of junk wasn’t just an accident. Someone had taken a baseball bat to the computer equipment. I wondered if this was where Archie

had inserted the flash drive—and if this was where he'd been caught.

We made it to the metal door of the large building directly across from the small structure, where I'd seen the flashing blue dot. Hopefully Archie.

"We've got no idea what's on the other side," Nick said, huffing out rapid breaths. "Sasquatch could be on the other side holding a sawed-off shotgun."

"Stay positive, Nick. We know Archie is about fifty feet south of here. First floor, second floor, no idea."

We both grabbed the door handle at the same time. "I'm going in first, low. You follow," I said. I motioned for him to open the door, and I stepped cautiously. A long, dark hallway. Doors down both sides, a light on in the distance straight ahead. Stairs through a door to my left. I hustled through that door, and Nick soon joined me by the metal staircase.

"I still think it makes sense to stay on the ground level and search it first," I said.

"Get Archie, hope that he has information about your mother, and then try to extract her without creating a firestorm," Nick repeated.

On our four-wheeler ride up the mountain to the back of the camp property, we'd already discussed the possibility that Archie could be injured, or worse. The GPS blip on my screen hadn't moved since I turned it on. We hoped that he was simply being restrained, preferably alone. But we couldn't be certain, not until we had eyes on him. For now, Nick kept the outlook positive, for Archie's sake and ours.

Nick peeked through the staircase door down the main hallway.

"Cover me," he said without giving me an option.

He raced out of his stance, shuffling low to the ground until he reached the first door on the right. It was open and dark inside. I ran up next to him and spun across the threshold with my gun drawn. Shelves of books lined one wall, a desk in the middle of the room.

"Probably just an office," Nick said.

We moved another ten feet down the hall until we reached the next door, this one on the left. It was also dark.

"Kids' toys and books. Might be where they hold class for young kids," Nick said.

Claudia had told me about the incest rumors. The most innocent of souls, and they had no control over how they were brought into this world. Most likely the kids had developmental disabilities, all because of their DNA. It sickened and saddened me at the same time.

I peeked at my phone and noticed the blue dot a little closer to our position. "We're getting warmer."

A quick glance into the hall, and I could make out an open area at the end where a dim light was shining. Couldn't see much, just the same industrial carpet we were standing on. With standard electricity still out, it wasn't surprising to see so much darkness. But I wished like hell everyone was asleep in their bedrooms, preferably with plugs in their ears.

Nick and I approached two more doors, both open, dark, and vacant. They had posters of biblical figures, and one room had paint and easels. More kids' classes, but maybe a little older than the other classroom.

"We're practically on top of him right now." I lifted my eyes to look at Nick, whose lips turned up at the edges.

"Archie would be in hog heaven if he heard you say that."

"Takes a pig to know what a pig thinks," I quipped.

"Good one."

"We'll check the next three rooms. If we don't see him, we head upstairs."

On our way out, the back door to the structure opened behind us. Nick and I jumped into the classroom. He started to close the door.

"No! They might expect it to be open. Hide." We frantically looked around for a place to conceal ourselves. I found a spot behind a small desk. Just before I crouched into a small ball, my gun at the ready, I noticed Nick tucked away under some sleeping mats. I was glad we both wore all black, but if someone shined a light in the room, we'd be caught. And that might initiate the confrontation Vandiver had begged us not to get into.

Two male voices walked up the hallway. But there was another noise, subtle but there. It sounded like the clinking of metal against metal, possibly something hollow.

"I've got to rest, Ezra. One moment while I wipe my brow."

They had stopped just outside our door. Crap! Under the bottom of the desk, I could see two pairs of shoes in the space outside the door. The one with duck feet looked familiar. It was the same older man walking away from the small structure with the destroyed computers.

"I told you I don't mind carrying it for you, Jamin. We're in this together, right?"

"Of course, son. But when you get to be my age..."

"You act like you're old."

I pressed my head against the floor, attempting to get a better look at the other person, Ezra. The electrical crew had noted his size. And that he was hairy. In fact, Ezra's voice sounded like it came from one of the black bears in the mountains.

The one named Jamin said, "I'm not as young and fit as you are."

"As you and Malachi have told us, we all have different skills and talents that can be used to help the cause. I'm just lucky one was given to me. I want to feel like I belong."

"You're a good man, Ezra. Unfortunately, I can't say the same about some of the others."

"I know, I know," Ezra said, his tone subdued.

"We can't question Malachi's wisdom or his path to enlightenment. He is only a mouthpiece for the Man above, and we are lucky to have him as our leader."

"I know, but—"

"It won't be easy, Ezra. The true path to enlightenment never is."

I could see both of them lean over, and then a *ding* and a grunt from Jamin. What had they picked up that was so heavy?

Footsteps moved away from the door. I waited a couple of seconds, then flipped around on my knees. "Nick, it's clear."

He scooted out from under the mats and crawled in my direction.

"What is that?" he asked.

My knee had landed on something hard and round. "It's a watch." I shined my phone on the timepiece. The glass was cracked.

"A platinum Tissot. Just the kind that Vandiver said Archie was wearing," Nick said.

My lips drew a straight line. "That could explain why the GPS signal never moved. His watch was in here the entire time."

A second of silence. "So...where is he then?" Nick asked.

I couldn't provide an immediate answer.

"Alex, he could be anywhere."

"I know."

"I hate to say it, but they might have killed him already."

My chest felt like a ten-pound weight had just dropped on it. "I know." I moved to my feet and then walked to the door and peeked into the hallway. It was vacant again.

"Without Archie, I'm wondering how the hell we'll find your mother," Nick said from just behind me.

I turned around to face my partner. "Doesn't make sense to move to the second floor. Not yet anyway. We've got to be very efficient in how we move. No wasted steps. The more time we're exposed, the bigger the risk of being caught, or at least seen, which then might create a panic."

Nick nodded. "You heard Ezra and Jamin, right?"

"Jamin is the old guy we saw outside by the computer building."

"One of the leaders probably. But he talked about Malachi like he was...I don't know."

"A prophet. Or maybe a higher rank than that if there is one," I said. "But it was their tone that concerned me the most. It sounded fatalistic."

Even in the darkness, I could see Nick's unblinking eyes. "I couldn't figure out what they were carrying, could you?"

"No, only saw their shoes. The Ezra fella wore boots the size of skis."

"He might be that Sasquatch-looking person I spotted outside. Then again, they might all be the size of Rob Gronkowski here, at least the younger generation. So where to now?"

I put a hand on his arm. "Nick, this mission...I think I may have underestimated the risk. And now with Archie either missing or...I don't know. I think you need to circle back and have Brad pick you up. You can provide support from the van."

“Fuck you, Alex.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you think I’m just going to put my tail between my legs and run away, then you don’t know me. So, fuck you!”

Nick bowed up to me, as if he wanted to punch me in the face. I’d never witnessed this type of aggression from my partner. But I still couldn’t help but smile.

“Really? I try to act tough and all you can do is smile?” he said, showing his teeth. “Anyway, you’ve got me right here by your side until the end.”

“Now who has the defeatist attitude?” I punched his upper arm.

We turned back to the doorway, prepared to follow in the same direction as the two men, knowing the closer we got, the more the light would show off our presence. With a quick nod, we both made a beeline for the next room, taking a brief stop to ensure no one saw us. We let a few seconds tick, and then we angled down the hallway for the next opening. We repeated the same exercise four more times, each time moving closer to the open area at the end of the hall.

Finally, we reached the last stop. “Which way do you think they went?” Nick was asking if Jamin and Ezra took a right or left up ahead.

“No clue. Don’t know what to expect.”

“Rock, paper, scissors? I’m left, you’re right.”

“I assume you’re joking.”

He opened his lips.

“We’re going right, unless we get there and see that it makes sense to go in the opposite direction.”

I took off, but Nick raced around me. Then a far door opened. I dove back where I came from and pressed against the wall, my heart chugging like I’d just sprinted a hundred yards while carrying a fifty-pound backpack.

I heard voices—men, women, even children—then realized I was missing Nick. He couldn’t just be standing in the middle of the floor, could he? I quickly pulled out my phone and used the mirror on the back to look down the hall. I saw the point of his gun sticking out from the threshold of the maintenance room door. He was pressing against the locked door.

I quickly flipped my mirror to look in the opposite direction, the voices growing louder. Ezra and Jamin stood on either side of a long line of people walking into a room. Some of the people wore pajamas, others were in T-shirts and pants. Many were yawning. Most importantly, they hadn’t seen me.

“Nick, stay there for now,” I whispered through the earpiece.

“I’m not moving. I’m hardly breathing.”

My eyes were back on the line of people walking into the far door. I looked at each woman, wondering if any were my mother. No one looked familiar, but it had been thirty years. I could hear Jamin chuckling. It was pleasant, as if he’d just seen an old friend. I wasn’t buying it. I turned my mirror slightly and found a set of double doors. Chains were intertwined



around the metal door handles. Angling the mirror down, I found large towels tucked at the bottom of the door.

I pulled back my phone and tried to keep my breathing under control.

“Think, Alex.” It was five o’clock in the morning, and the camp residents were being ushered into a room. Had to be a large room. Was it the sanctuary? I took another quick glance using my mirror. The woodwork around the double doors was more ornate. I could see what looked like angels etched into the facade.

Suddenly, a kid took off in our direction. He was young, maybe five, and he was yelling, “I don’t want to go to church. I’m tired of church.” A man, who I assumed was his dad, raced after him. I pulled my gun up to my chest, hoping the dad would catch the kid before he made it to my position.

“Come back here,” the man called out.

I shook my head as the kid drew closer. I took in a breath, ready to flip around the corner and take aim at the man, but I knew that would probably incite a violent response—all hell would break loose.

Inside my mind, I counted down. Three, two, one.

“Now I’ve got you,” the dad growled.

“Let me go. I don’t want to go to church.”

I heard a smack. Did he just hit the kid upside the head?

The kid began to cry quietly, but the noise dissipated. I put my mirror phone back out there and saw them walking back to the far set of doors, Jamin extending an arm.

I released a breath, thankful I didn’t have to use my gun. Not yet. The final person walked into the sanctuary. Ezra and Jamin were about to follow everyone else, and then one more person appeared. He was tall, well built, with a stout chin. His face had lines, but he carried an aura about him. He was dressed in a ribbed, V-neck T-shirt and cargo pants. He seemed to smile at Jamin, but it was quick, as if he didn’t want anyone to see him. They disappeared into the sanctuary, and the doors clanked shut.

“Nick, get back over here.”

He scooted down the wall and jumped next to me. I shared with him what I’d seen.

“What could they be planning?”

“I don’t know. They could be doing some type of public beating, and they don’t want people leaving,” I said. “We’ve got to go in. We finally have everyone in one place. They probably won’t have their weapons drawn in the sanctuary.”

“We hope,” Nick said.

“It’s our best chance.”

Nick nodded his agreement. “It might be our only chance.”

I remembered my phone had buzzed earlier, and I unlocked it. A text from Gretchen with two mug shots: one was Jamin and one was Malachi. I held the phone up so Nick could see. “That’s them, the two leaders,” I said. “Gretchen

says the pictures are seven years old. But that's definitely them."

"They might act like they're above the human race to everyone here, but I'm guessing they'll fall if my Glock has to step in and do its job." Nick peeked around the corner and then turned back to me. "You ready?"

I found myself lost in the eyes of Malachi, and I could feel a tug in the back of my mind.

"Alex?"

I pocketed my phone. "I wish we could get a visual on the scene inside before we just plow into the room."

The loud sound of chains banging against metal and wood almost sent my heart through my chest. I quickly set my phone mirror to where I could look around the corner again. "Crap. Ezra is chaining up the doors everyone just entered through." Without wasting another second, I jumped into the open space, my gun aimed right at Ezra twenty-five yards away.

"Stop where you are. Don't move!" Blood raced through my veins so fast it took everything I had to keep my gun from shaking.

The behemoth of a man ceased movement, his head still down.

"Turn around and keep your hands—"

"Gun!" Nick yelled at the exact moment an automatic weapon crackled the air. Orange flashes sputtered from behind Ezra just before Nick tackled me to the ground. Wood splinters sprayed all around us as we rolled away from the shooter as fast as we could move. I hit a wall, and Nick rolled right up next to me. A moment passed, and then I took a breath. The shots had stopped.

I felt the grip of the gun still in my hand. I rolled over Nick, my arms in front of me ready to squeeze the trigger. "They're gone." I looked over at Nick, who had said nothing in response. "Did you hear me?"

He was on his side, and I nudged him. "I'm hit. In the shoulder." He rolled onto his back, his face hardened with pain. A hole was in his black jacket on the left shoulder, a red glow deep inside the hole. The bullet had missed his Kevlar jacket. "Just the luck, huh?" he grunted.

"Crap!" I glanced over my shoulder. Still no sign of Ezra or the shooter.

"I think the shooter was Jamin. It was someone shorter. He wasn't a very good shot. If he had been, we'd both look like a pegboard."

Sweat bubbled on Nick's forehead, and he gripped his arm tight against his body. "Help me up."

"Nick, stay here. I need to get inside the sanctuary."

"Fuck you. I'm not an invalid. Get me up." He moved to his knees, and I helped him up the rest of the way. "Hand me my gun."

"Nick—"

"You think I'm just going to sit here? Quit wasting time. Let's get in the sanctuary."

I handed him his gun, then ran over to the door and tried tugging on it. The chains were secured by a padlock. I could hear people screaming inside.

“Get away from the door. I’m going to fire my gun,” I yelled.

I waited a few seconds. “Is everyone away?”

A voiced yelled, “Yes, please hurry. People are fainting.”

I took aim and fired at the padlock. The bullet pierced the steel, obliterating the locking mechanism. Nick pulled chains off the door, and I barreled into the sanctuary with my gun leading the way, unsure of what or who would greet us.

The same little boy who had tried to run away earlier was standing there, pointing to a pew. “Can you help my daddy?”

I touched his head. “Yes.” As I glanced up, two, three, four people toward the front of the sanctuary dropped to the floor.

“They’re trying to gas everyone,” I said.

Nick pulled up next to me and yelled, “Everyone out. Quick!”

Murmurs of concern burst into wild screams. People scrambled for the door, tripping over each other. The boy was nearly stampeded, so I hooked him under my arm and ran him into the foyer, then scooted by a few folks on a dead run and made it back into the sanctuary.

“Out. Everyone run. Grab those who have passed out and drag them with you,” Nick yelled.

Chaos reigned for at least two minutes as my eyes searched for my mom and Archie.

“Do you see her?” Nick asked over the shouts and cries.

Scores of people ran by, the only thing in common was how they dressed—as if it were a hundred fifty years ago.

“No, and no sign of Archie either.”

Bringing up the rear of the pack was a woman who was attempting to drag a man out. I ran over and grabbed both of his ankles and started pulling. “Get out,” I told her.

“Not until he’s safe,” she said as tears dripped off her cheeks. I leaned backward and started chugging my feet. Momentum picked up, and we were through the threshold a few seconds later.

“Close the doors! Seal them shut!” I yelled, out of breath.

Nick and another man shut the door while a woman ran up with blankets. They placed them at the crease.

I could hear crying going on behind me. I punched the button on my earpiece. “Brad, Vandiver, need first responders sent into the compound, ASAP. Likely a gas exposure of some kind.”

Vandiver confirmed my request as I turned back to the group. “It’s still not safe. Everyone needs to get outside.”

A woman stepped forward and said, “Outside isn’t even safe, not with these homicidal maniacs somewhere on the grounds.”

“How can you say that?” someone yelled from the crowd.

“Are you fucking insane? They tried to murder over a hundred people!” the woman said.

Just then, the little boy I'd pulled out of the sanctuary ran across the foyer. "It's in here. Follow me."

I looked at Nick, who shrugged his shoulders. I ran after the kid, a few of the other folks right behind me. The kid stopped at the maintenance door.

"It's in here. I saw Ezra bring in a can of gas last night. It had the word sarin written on it. He didn't know I saw him."

"Dear God," a woman gasped.

"Stand back," I said. I brought my gun up and fired into the doorjamb. It exploded, and then Nick kicked the door in. Ten cans of sarin gas were on a shelf, hooked into some type of ventilation system that disappeared into the ceiling panels.

"Let me shut them off," a younger man said, whizzing by me. Before I could warn or stop him, he was twisting the valves shut.

"We still need to get everyone outside. There could be further exposure."

"But what if Jamin and Malachi are out there, just waiting for us to walk out so they can shoot us down like ducks on a pond?" a woman asked.

"I don't think they're here." The young man who had turned off the gas stepped toward Nick and me.

"Why?"

He took in a breath and shook his head. "I've been a damn fool, ignoring the signs." The young man looked more like a grown boy, maybe twenty years old, tall and strapping.

"What is it, Levi?" the woman said.

"Jamin and Malachi have both been spending a lot of time analyzing the reports from the Center over the last few weeks. I heard them talking, and it sounded like they were preparing to end operations."

I put a hand to my head, wondering what their end game was.

"So they wanted to kill everyone in the camp? Why?"

"I had no idea they wanted to do that, but I did help them work on their H3 in the last couple of weeks," Levi said.

"What's an H3?" Nick asked.

"It's called a Hummer. Ever heard of those vehicles?" Levi asked.

I looked at Nick. "So they wanted to kill everyone and then drive right out?"

Nick shook his head, which was coated with a sheen of sweat. His skin was pale.

"You've lost blood. You need to sit down, away from this gas and wait for the paramedics."

Just then, an enormous explosion, but this one came from outside.

"What the fuck?" Nick exclaimed.

"I'm almost positive that's the H3." Levi started jogging back across the foyer.

"Where are you going?" I asked, trailing him.

"The latch to the barn sometimes doesn't open easily. I'm guessing they

plowed the H3 right through the barn doors.”

He raced outside, pulling to a stop ten feet out, the sky a shade lighter than it had been when Nick and I first arrived. I noticed a barn off to the left, remnants of the doors still attached to the main structure, but most of the wood was scattered within a fifty-foot radius.

“Holy shit,” I said.

“There.” Levi pointed toward the woods.

A vehicle’s brake lights flashed red for a couple of seconds. “Is that even a road?”

“Just a trail, from what I know.”

Others begin spilling outside. “Get everyone out. Now,” I called out. A few of the adults started wrangling more people out of the building. I continued to look for my mother.

“Has anyone seen a woman named Charlotte...I mean, Beulah?” I called out.

“Beulah. Oh yeah, she’s been here longer than anyone,” a woman said.

I ran over to the woman, who had a daughter pressed against her leg.

“Where is she?” I asked, my voice panicked. I couldn’t help it.

She looked around as a look of despair suddenly washed across her face.

“I haven’t seen her. I...” She put her hands in her face.

“What is it?” I took hold of her arms.

“Malachi...he has this thing for her. It’s kind of a love-hate relationship. And if she’s not here with us, she’s probably either dead or with him in that car.”

My lungs couldn’t take in oxygen. I coughed twice, just to reopen my air passage. “Is there another vehicle on the camp?” I asked Levi just as Nick jogged up.

“Well, there’s the old pickup. Ezra mainly drives that.”

“Where is it?” I could hear Nick talking to Vandiver through my earpiece, but I couldn’t focus on the specifics.

“Uh, other side, parked under some trees.”

“Can you show me?”

“Sure, but I don’t have the keys. I’ve only seen Ezra and Jamin driving that truck.”

“Fuck!” I cried out.

“Please don’t curse in front of the children.” A man with a beard down to his chest stood there, his thumbs hooked inside his suspenders.

“None of you did a damn thing as they tortured and raped women,” I spat out.

The man blinked, but pressed his bearded lips shut.

“And they killed too,” the woman said. “Graves are on the other side of that ridge there.” She gestured with her head. “Girls of all ages, even a few men. Most recently, Hodiah, and then later her daughter, Jaala. Malachi changed her name back to Amber at the end.”

I stood there with my mouth open, shaking my head. “How the hell could you let this happen...all these years? Rape, murder. This isn’t a house of God; it’s a camp of torture.” I could hear a few whimpers grow into sobs as heads nodded, but no one said a word. There was too much shame. Too much pain.

My mother.

“Nick, stay here and make sure these people get the help they need. And try to find Archie.” I sprinted toward the trail that the Hummer had traveled. I punched the button on the comm device on my ear. “Vandiver, I’m moving out of the camp on foot, heading southeast. A silver Hummer—”

“Alex,” Nick yelled from behind me, “I already called Vandiver.”

“I’m looking at an aerial map right now.” It was Brad. “We’re en route to intercept your path in a half mile. Keep running in the same direction.”

“Good luck,” Nick yelled in my earpiece.

I ran a good hundred yards, the trail full of dips and inclines, but it was apparent that a bulldozer had cleared this path recently. Pumping my arms as hard as they could go, I put another hundred yards behind me, then out of nowhere, a white van practically flew into my path, skidding to a stop just in front of me, the side door already open with Brad extending a hand. “Jump in.”

I did just that, and Vandiver punched the gas. I would have tumbled to the floor, but Brad grabbed me and held me upright. We locked eyes for a split second. He must have seen my desperation.

“Your mother?”

“I think she’s in that Hummer. Either that or she’s dead.”

“And Archie?” Vandiver asked as the van dipped, then rocked back up, chewing up dirt in the process.

“Only found his watch in one of the classrooms. Nick is looking for him now.”

Brad flipped around as best he could and pointed at the screen, showing me the trail we were on. “They could intersect with Highway 35, or I guess continue on this trail and stay off-road.”

“Does this path lead anywhere special?” I asked, clinging more tightly to Brad as the van swung left, nearly hurling me into the bank of computers and screens.

Vandiver from up front: “Fuck!”

“What is it?” Brad asked, his voice barely audible above the grinding engine.

“It just hit me. There’s an airstrip down here about three miles. Rarely used, but a small plane could land and take off from there.”

“That’s got to be it.” I wondered if my mother was in the Hummer. If she was alive and conscious, what was she thinking about Malachi and Jamin? Did she even have any recollection of her past?

“Alex, we’ll catch them,” Brad said. “Before they take off. We’ll get to them.”

He was trying to say the right things, but I knew he was promising something that couldn't be guaranteed.

"What the—" Vandiver shouted as the van lurched to a stop, skidding across dirt and wet leaves.

Brad reached for me, but the force sent my body flying. I tumbled forward, stopping next to Vandiver's feet.

"What happened?" I asked with my feet still above my head.

He unlatched his seatbelt and swung open his door. "It's a body."

Scrambling to my feet, I crawled over the front bucket seat and out the door.

"Archie!" Vandiver yelled, dropping to his knees.

I was right behind him. At first, Archie didn't move or utter a word. Finally, a moan, and then he turned over. His face looked like it had been the hood ornament when the Hummer had blasted through the barn.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Alex...." He extended a hand toward me. A blood-soaked bandage wrapped his middle finger.

"What the hell happened, Archie?"

"They beat the shit out of me, so I spit on that motherfucker, Malachi, and flipped off his hairy beast friend." He chuckled, but it morphed into an agonizing cough. "That's right, I flipped him off. So they cut off most of my middle finger."

"Holy shit," Brad said, sidling up next to us.

"My thoughts exactly, wonder boy," Archie said, attempting to sit up. Vandiver gave him a hand.

"Did they stop and let you out of the Hummer?" Brad asked.

"That would have been far too courteous. For those of us going straight to hell, manners aren't tops on their list." He coughed once more. "They opened the door while the frickin' tank was hauling ass. They were fighting over whether to shoot me dead or push me out. So I just jumped and saved the debate."

I looked down the path, searching for lights. Nothing. "How long since you jumped?"

"Two, three minutes. Not long."

"Was my mom in the Hummer?"

He held up two fingers.

"What does that mean?" Vandiver asked.

"Two ladies on board. Well, one was a teenage girl. I heard them call her Shiloh. She was crying the whole time. But your mom helped calm her. She was being strong."

A swell of emotion shot up my spine, a hint of tears at the corners of my eyes. "Can you walk?"

"Just toss me in the back. I'll live."

We weren't that callous. Vandiver and Brad carried Archie into the back

and set him on the floor, his back against the wall. Vandiver threw the gear into drive, and the van was back to eating dirt in no time.

“Is there a tower at this airstrip?” I asked, as the van bobbed up and down.

“Not sure. If so, they don’t work twenty-four/seven. If there’s a plane there, it’s likely been done without knowledge from any FAA officials.”

I put my hand on Brad’s shoulder. “Call Jerry. We need his permission to scramble a jet, just in case they take off.”

Brad rang Jerry as I looked ahead and saw a break in the trees.

“That’s it, up ahead,” Vandiver said, cutting the van right through a thick bundle of bushes, sending me airborne. I fell to my knees.

“Everyone okay back there?”

I turned and glanced at Archie, who grimaced but gave me the thumbs-up.

I pulled myself upright, then crawled toward the front. I saw red lights flashing on a single engine plane near the end of the runway, a Hummer parked next to it with the doors open.

“Where’s the front gate to this airstrip?”

“It’s down another half mile. Can’t waste the time. Hold on,” Vandiver called out as we barreled through a chain-link fence. One of the metal posts whipped around, punching a hole through the front glass. Vandiver held up an arm and cried out. I quickly grasped the steering wheel and tried to keep us from turning on our side.

“I’ve got glass in my right eye!”

A cold, wet wind whipped through the hole in the windshield. “I’ve got it, Vandiver.” I steered as best as I could while Vandiver recovered. I heard the airplane revving its engine, and then it started to move away from us. We were still fifty yards from the runway. I slammed my foot on top of Vandiver’s, and the van lurched forward.

“I’ve got it, Alex,” he said, holding one hand over his bloody eye, gripping the steering wheel, his foot back on the gas.

We instantly gained ground on the plane. “How long’s the runway?”

“Think it’s three thousand feet.”

“Short as hell,” Brad said.

I pulled my Glock from the holster. “Pull up next to it. Brad, open the side of the van.”

Brad slid the door open, and a rush of wind poured into the van, causing Vandiver to swerve a bit. Just a single car length behind the plane, we were gaining on them, but the plane was picking up speed. I could see flaps on the airplane turn downward. Brad looked at me and the gun. “You can’t shoot them. If you puncture the gas tank, they could crash after takeoff.”

I heard him, but I still wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. Vandiver edged the van closer to the plane so that I could see in the window. A woman’s face.

“Mom,” I called out.

A big hand shoved her head out of the way, and then I saw him. Malachi and those haunting eyes. A flashback to when I was a kid—the man outside



the grocery store. The one who had acted all high and mighty. He was the one who had cajoled my mother into leaving me, her family.

With the wind rocking me left and right, I pulled my gun up and took aim at the man who had shredded my family.

“Stop,” Brad called out, grabbing my arm. “You could hurt your mom.”

Just then, the airplane door popped open, and my mom stuck out a hand, then half her body. Malachi was trying to pull her back.

“Pull up closer,” I yelled. Vandiver moved us within eight feet of the cabin, but the airplane’s tires were no more than a couple of feet from the van. One little twitch, and we could end up in a crash that could kill us all.

My mom smacked at the hands trying to pull her back in. She bit down on Malachi’s arm, giving her a brief moment to stick her hand out toward me. I tossed my gun into the van and did the same as my mother, Brad holding on to my belt loop as I leaned out at a forty-five degree angle. I stretched as far as I could go, her hand no more than six inches away. The pavement whizzed underneath me at a dizzying speed, the strained engines and blustery wind making it impossible to hear my own voice as I called out, “Closer. Get me closer.”

Brad was now using two hands to secure me. Archie was holding him, his arm locked onto the front seat.

A scream pierced the air. Malachi was tugging on my mom’s long hair. I looked down the runway and saw the end, a small fence with two lights on top.

“Mom!” I stuck out my hand as far it could reach, paying no attention to whether I would fall or not.

At that same moment, she threw an elbow into Malachi’s face, then literally jumped for me, even though he still had a grip on her opposite arm. She touched my hand, our eyes locking for a split second. “Alexandra!” she yelled. Her face was filled with fear, her brow furrowed like an accordion, her frizzy, gray hair flying all over the place.

I tried to grip her fingertips, but I needed another inch. “A little...bit...closer...”

Jamin appeared, yelling something about Shiloh, then held the young girl out the door. She was wailing, pawing at Jamin to let her back in.

He was going to kill her.

Mom instantly dropped her arm, but her eyes held me for an extra tick. They were remorseful, but also full of love. And in a split second, the airplane lifted from the pavement as Malachi pulled Mom back into the cabin. Brad tugged me back into the van, and Vandiver cut right and hit the brakes. Brad, Archie, and I tumbled over each other, slamming into the front of the van.

Grabbing the dash, I pulled myself up and peered through the jagged hole in the windshield. I watched the single engine plane disappear over a nearby mountain. “She’s gone.”

For the second time in a week, I dressed in all black. Bagpipes played Irish music as Mom's casket was rolled to her gravesite, just a few feet from my dad. A green tarp was draped over the mound of dirt that would soon be shoveled back into the hole. My chest felt tight, as I imagined the piles of dirt being loaded on top of me. Suffocating. That was how I believed Mom must have felt for three-plus decades. And it wasn't a comforting feeling.

I stared at the box that held my mom's ashes. It didn't take much for the funeral home to cremate my mother. She had been dropped—or had jumped, as some had guessed—from the plane just on the other side of the mountain from our van. A hunter found her later that day, about the same time that the FBI caught up with Malachi, Jamin, and Ezra in South Africa. From what Jerry shared, thankfully, the young girl, Shiloh, was alive and physically unharmed. Her mental and emotional state of mind was another thing altogether. Jerry wondered if she would ever be able to blend in with society, feel remotely normal.

Nestled against my side, Luke looked up at me. "It's kind of strange, Mom. I miss her, even though I didn't know her." I ran my fingers through his thick head of hair, swallowing back a lump in my throat.

"I know what you mean, Luke. I'll miss her too. Actually, I have for a long time."

Both Luke and Erin had insisted on coming with me to Port Isabel, Texas. While initially I found it almost strange that they'd want to go to a funeral of a person they never knew, I could sense they just wanted to be close to me. I didn't push back.

Erin hooked her arm inside mine just as the casket was lowered into the ground. "Amazing Grace" played in the background. I couldn't help but think of those few seconds I had connected with my mother, albeit at over eighty miles per hour. Even through the desperate attempt to escape and all of our lives hanging in the balance, her eyes seemed to say so much to me—sorrow for not being there for me, pride in seeing whom I had become, sadness for knowing it was all about to end.

I felt a hand on my back and turned to see Brad's caring, strong gaze. He ushered us to the car, and from there, we went to the beach at South Padre Island—that included Vandiver, Jerry, Mario, Gretchen and her boyfriend Brandon, Ezzy, and of course Nick and Archie, both wearing arm slings from their injuries. We had a cookout, played music, and just socialized. For a November day, the weather had cooperated, outside of a blustery, southern wind. I stood barefoot at the edge of the sudsy ocean water creeping up the sandy beach. Puffy white clouds dodged the sun, creating a playful dance of shadows across the rocky edges of the cobalt-blue Gulf.

Jerry came up and said a few caring words, followed by Vandiver.

"If you ever want to put in a transfer, don't forget about us in West Virginia. We could use you," Vandiver said.

"I'll keep it in mind," I said, though I knew that was the last place I wanted to be. "I forgot to ask about the people in the compound. How many were harmed by the gas?"

"Two died. Ten others had extended stays in the hospital, but they should make it. We were lucky as hell it didn't turn into another Jonestown... Well, minus the leaders being killed of course."

"Of course." I sighed.

"You've had your two minutes. Can I have this dance?"

I turned and almost snorted out a laugh.

Archie was down on one knee, bowing his head as if he were kneeling before seventeenth-century royalty.

"Get your ass up here and give me a hug," I said.

Teetering a bit, Archie lifted up and gave me a one-arm embrace.

"Look out," he said.

"Oh, sorry. Bruised ribs, right?"

"That's not the half of it. My ego's been shredded the last few days."

I tilted my head, once again not following his train of thought.

"First, Felicia dumped me."

"I never knew you were really a couple. Didn't you just do your thing with her in the barn that one time?"

"Shit, she said I was the best sex she ever had. You should have seen some of the text messages I got." He actually fanned himself. "You want me to show you?"

Shaking my head, I said, "Please don't. You've warped me enough."

He paused for a second, studying my blank facial expression. Then he popped my shoulder with his good hand, "Oh, I know you're just joking. Anyway, Felicia's parting text mentioned that she'd just met a new guy."

"Wow, she gets around. And her husband?"

"She said he can't get it up and the only reason she's still with him is to cash in on his life insurance policy once he smokes himself to death."

"Nice. What a caring person," I deadpanned, arching an eyebrow. "You're better off without her."

"Yeah, probably so. But man, she was the hottest thing I've had since that freaky, possessed woman here in Padre."

"Who can forget her? She was a beautiful woman."

"But Felicia was country hot. Know what I mean?"

"No, but for the sake of ending this conversation, yes."

"Anyway, she told me the new guy is also a vet. And that—" He pursed his lips as the wind played with his helmet hair.

"Do I want to know?"

He ignored my question as he brought a hand to his mouth, as if he were

about to pour open his soul. “She said her new vet is hung like Herkimer.”

I had nothing to say.

“Herkimer is her horse,” he clarified.

Oh hell. I winced and said, “I get it. Thanks for the visual.”

I faced the ocean, closing my eyes for a brief moment and took in the salty air.

“Then, on top of that,” he said.

“You’re still here?” I said with my eyes still closed.

“Well, it turns out that Dana at the diner was a bit of a mole for the Camp Israel folks. She was feeding the information she’d overheard at our table to Malachi and Jamin.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “No shit?”

“We’ve uncovered a lot more on those two,” Vandiver said as he approached, Gretchen and Nick just behind him, holding adult beverages.

“Thanks to Gretchen here, their financial trail has finally been exposed.”

I shifted my eyes to the diminutive SOS.

She said, “I guess you know they were running a phone bank out of their little shed. Apparently, they had created a so-called nonprofit organization that funded spreading the faith into different locations all across the world—a ministry in Guatemala, a school in Australia, and an orphanage in South Africa. But it was all a ruse. The money was spent on lavish gifts, including enormous mansions and estates in each of these countries.”

“They were like that twisted, money-grubbing scoundrel here in Texas a few years back,” I said.

“Robert Tilton. It’s as if they took a page from his playbook,” Gretchen said.

“So it was all about the money,” I said.

“Who knows?” Nick countered. “At first, it might have been about some supposed higher calling.”

I frowned. “To brainwash and torture women?”

“Good point. But then it evolved somewhere along the way, and absolute power wasn’t enough,” he suggested.

“Apparently, absolute loyalty never existed.” Jerry had just waddled up, kicking sand into our faces. We all turned and tried to spit out the gritty granules.

“Sorry, I’m just not a beach guy.”

“Loyalty?” I prompted him.

“Oh, Jamin can’t stop talking to our FBI investigators in South Africa. He’s dumping everything at Malachi’s feet.”

“What about extradition?” Nick asked.

“Could take weeks, maybe months, but once they turn on each other, it’s like a shark frenzy. We can just sit back and watch the bloody carnage.”

I felt the urge to get involved, to personally go over to South Africa and interrogate the pair of men who had ruined my life, to look them in the eye

and make them face their sins. As everyone continued talking shop, I stepped back and watched Erin and Luke toss a football. That was when I realized I had to let it go. To dive back into the moat of bitterness would probably take years off my life. And it would impact my future years with my two kids. They didn't deserve that. And I didn't either.

Brad jumped in and played football with the kids, and Ezzy sidled up to me. I put my head on her shoulder as she draped her arm around me. Tears spilled from my eyes. She didn't say a word. She just held me and loved me.

"Hey, Alex, sorry to interrupt."

I wiped my face as Nick came up to us. "Before I forget, I wanted you to have something."

He pulled out two things from his pocket. One was a picture of me. "I must be six years old here," I said, holding the picture in my hand.

"Investigators found it in your mother's room. That along with this." He held up a handwritten note, but the paper was ripped, part of it missing.

"What happened?"

"They don't know. Found it in a trash can. They only found this part. But it's obvious she wrote it to you. Mentions you by name."

He handed me the note, which I quickly gave to Ezzy. "I can't read it. Not now. I've been through enough. Maybe later, after the drama has subsided."

We turned around and watched the ocean waves crash onto the shore, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

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### *Six Weeks Later*

Ezzy wrapped up the last of the Christmas decorations and handed me the box. I stuffed it inside a plastic bin and then smacked my hands together. "Another Christmas bites the dust."

I picked up the bin and brought it to the kitchen, where another ten bins filled with ornaments and other decorations were ready to be taken to the garage. Brad had already made six trips.

Ezzy handed me a mug of hot chocolate, and I sipped it as we watched the kids toss leaves on each other—that was their attempt at raking up the ankle-deep bed of leaves covering the yard. Brad chuckled as he walked past them and came into the kitchen.

"Your back holding up?" I asked.

"I think I might need a deep-tissue massage later. You up for it?" he said, flashing his cute dimples.

I looked at Ezzy, who quickly turned on the water and pretended to wash her hands. I nodded and leaned close to his ear. "That and more."

He grinned, then headed back outside. Ezzy joined me at the bar, reading the headlines on the newspaper as I thumbed through a few work emails on my cell phone.

"FBI offices in San Antonio are closing early today," I said. "Some type

of crazy ice storms are hitting central Texas. And that's one area that can't deal with anything more than a frozen margarita."

"Always some type of weather drama in some part of the country. Hopefully everyone can stay safe," Ezzy said, her eyes still perusing the headlines.

Another moment passed. "I can't take it anymore, Dr. Alex. We need to get this behind you," she said.

I turned my palms to the ceiling. "Not sure what you're..."

She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. "The note that Nick gave you, from your mom."

I had done a good job of blanking it from my memory. Perhaps it was my own way of dealing with the pain. I felt stronger now, the memories still vivid, but I'd been able to focus on the positive parts of my life and keep a reasonably healthy perspective on what Mom had been through. I knew I couldn't undo the last thirty years of my life.

"Okay, let's do this," I said, taking in a breath.

I opened up the crumpled paper and saw the tear mark right in the middle of a sentence. I apparently had the second half of the note.

*And even after everything that I've shared with you in this note, I can't help but feel the biggest regret in leaving you, Alexandra. As I've lived all these years in this camp, I've gained perspective on who I am, who I used to be. I wasn't an easy person to love when you were young. I had a lot going on in my mind. I was searching for something, and as I look back on it, that something was right in front of me. Acceptance. I tried to be perfect in every way imaginable, but, unfortunately, I only pushed away those I loved.*

*There isn't a day that goes by when I don't think about you running around the backyard, or playing tennis with your father. I'm sorry for not being there, for not being a true mother. I only pray...yes, pray, that someday you'll read this and you'll have your own loving family.*

*God bless. I love you.*

*Mom*

I thumbed a tear at the corner of my eye as Ezzy put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"You okay?"

I nodded and released a breath. "She loved me. She only wanted me to be happy."

"Indeed. I hope this brings closure." She handed me a napkin, and I dabbed the corners of my eyes, my thoughts looking ahead. For some reason, it felt like the last invisible weight had been removed from my shoulders, allowing me to *see* a future, not just hope for one.

I looked out the window, then lifted from my chair and headed to the back door. Behind me, Ezzy said, "Go for it, Alex. I'm right there with you."

I couldn't help but smile as I jumped into the backyard, picked up the football, and started throwing it around with my two kids and Brad. After a

while, the kids went back to showering each other with leaves. I took Brad's hand, pulled him behind a tree, and shared the note with him.

"It's amazing she wrote this note for you, not really knowing you'd ever get to read it."

"I kind of wonder what's in the first part, but yeah, I feel relieved."

He hugged me and tenderly kissed my cheek. As he took a step back, I pulled him closer, gripping his T-shirt. I peered into his grayish-blue eyes.

"What, Alex?"

"I love you, Brad." I could feel my chest heaving with deep breaths as our eyes locked. "I'm not fishing for you to say anything back, but I've wanted to tell you for a while. I guess I had to resolve a couple of things from my past."

He brought me to his chest, and I could feel his heart pounding. His soft lips touched mine, instantly creating a shot of electricity racing through my body. Our tongues danced as he gripped my sides and held me tight. I lost myself in everything Brad. I had no idea how much time elapsed. Ten seconds, ten minutes? I finally came up for air, feeling lightheaded.

"Alex," he said, his firm grip still on my waist. "I love you. I just didn't know how to tell you."

We touched foreheads while interlacing our fingers. The kids played behind us, and I could hear Ezzy laughing as well.

They say you don't get to choose your family. But through fate or divine intervention, I felt like I'd won the lottery. I was the luckiest girl on the planet.

# **ALSO BY JOHN W. MEFFORD**

## **Redemption Thriller Series**

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***Note from the author:***

Thank you for reading this latest Alex Troutt thriller.

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Here's the easy link: <http://smarturl.it/gtpp21>

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She survived. But no one truly escapes their past.

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Childhood secrets erupt into the present, and Ivy's in the fight for her life.

*IN Defiance* is the first of the Ivy Nash Thrillers (Redemption Thriller Series #7). An excerpt is just below.

**Excerpt from IN Defiance (Ivy Nash Thriller, Book  
1)**

*Ivy at Age Thirteen*

During my free ride back into town, the driver only groped me once. I considered that a victory as I shut the car door a block down from my house. I didn't want the pervert to know where I lived. And I didn't want Frank, the latest excuse for a foster dad, to know I'd gotten a lift home from a stranger. It was one of his house rules.

"I need to know who you're with day and night. That's my job," he'd said the first day the caseworker from Child Protective Services dropped me at the doorstep. With a smile that usually included a gnarled cigar and deep trenches on either side of his mouth, he came across like he was my protector. My knight in shining armor.

He'd faked it pretty well in front of the caseworker, a heavysset woman in her early fifties who seemed more stressed than I was—even though I was the one walking into my thirteenth foster home. It took only a week before I realized his armor was as real as the imitation hardwood floors throughout the humble home.

A corner streetlight flickered, and a gust of wind dipped the branches of a sad-looking live oak in the neighbor's front yard. I lived in a forgettable town east of San Antonio. There might have been something positive about Seguin, but I couldn't think of much.

A foul odor made me wrinkle my nose. Shaking my head, I figured the twisted little brat from next door had been cooking squirrels on his backyard grill again. His parents thought he was just going through a phase. Damn, some people were just blind to reality. Or maybe his parents were naïve, or even plain stupid. Given the drab, rundown homes and yards in the area, I had a feeling there weren't many Einsteins living near me.

I could see lights blinking through the cracks in the blinds of our front window. Frank was most likely sitting in his leather recliner, either whacking off to some X-rated flick or guzzling his umpteenth beer of the night while watching some show about the end of the world. But I also knew this meant that his wife, Maybelle—an equally disgusting foster parent—was most likely passed out in the bedroom from another bender or off visiting her meth-addicted sister the next county over.

I had to assume Frank was awake and in a state of mind I would be wise to avoid, so I cut between the two houses and headed for the rear entrance. I slithered in the back door, through the filthy kitchen, and into the hallway leading to my room.

*Just get to my room, lock the door, and everything will be okay in the morning.*

The silhouette of a massive figure entered the hallway from my bedroom. “Where have you been?”

It was Frank, and he was drunk, slurring his words. The smell of beer and his disgusting body odor filled up the narrow hallway, which seemed even smaller with his presence looming a few feet in front of me. My stomach started to churn.

“What were you doing in my room? We had an agreement. You stay out of my room, and I won’t tell the caseworker about all of your little fetishes.”

Wearing no more than an undersized wifebeater and holey boxers, he laughed out loud and patted his huge belly. It took almost a minute for him to compose himself. I tried to look past him to see if Maybelle might be in their bedroom. But I knew it wouldn’t really matter. Most of the time she let him do whatever he wanted. She had once even played along.

“Listen, darlin’, you seem to forget who the king of this castle is,” he said, snorting out another chortle.

An invisible cloud of beer and pizza nearly knocked me over, and I turned away. Then I felt his hand on my face. It didn’t feel human. Bile crept up the back of my throat—my body’s way of warning me that bad things were about to happen. Things I couldn’t control. Things that made me want to stop living.

“Frank, I’m really tired after a long day at school. The game ended late, okay?” I’d told him earlier that I was walking up to the high school to watch a district basketball game.

“First, don’t call me Frank,” he said, then he cleared his throat and lowered his volume. “You know I like for you to call me Poppy.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “You need to grow your hair out. You’d be pretty that way.”

My whole body tensed up. “I like my hair the way it is.” I tried to act strong, but I knew I wasn’t very convincing.

He stroked my neck, and I could feel the callouses on his hands snag my skin. Then his hand moved lower. “Take off your T-shirt, Ivy,” he said, his penetrating eyes boring holes into my soul.

“Is Maybelle home?” I said, trying to look around his obese body. That was when I noticed the stairs from the attic were folded down.

“She’s off at her sister’s. They’re probably hitting the Austin club scene, trying to get laid. But as the man of the house, my needs should come first. Don’t you agree?”

I scooted by him without answering. “What’s up in the attic? I used to hide out in an attic at one of my earlier homes.” I put a foot on the first step, but quickly felt his grip around my upper arm.

I grabbed one of the ladder rungs, prepared for a fight. But he loosened his grip. “Well, actually, I’ve been trying to work on a project up there. You know, fix the place up.”

Trying to keep the subject moving in a direction other than him having his way with me, I scampered up the rungs. “Cool. I like home improvement

projects. What have you done?"

Even with his size and his drunken condition, he was right behind me, the ladder shaking violently. Just as I reached the top, he playfully spanked my bottom. I wanted to hurl.

He pulled a cord, and a sparkling, twirling light popped on. He chuckled. "You like it?"

My mouth hung open as I stared at the makeshift bedroom. He walked past me, patting my butt once again. He made it to the side of the mattress. "Authentic silk sheets."

I nodded, then spotted magazines on a side table next to the bed. The same ones he'd shown me once before. There was a TV set up near the foot of the bed, and a VCR.

"What the hell do you think this is going to be used for?" I asked.

He grinned, showing off teeth with black marks. "It's my disco setup. It'll be cool. You'll see. Come over and join me." He patted the mattress like it was an old, reliable horse.

I crossed my arms against my chest, my feet unable to move.

"Yep, we've got lots we can do up in our fun room," he said, his eyes casting a gaze across his disgusting bachelor pad. "And up here, we won't get interrupted by Maybelle or anyone else who drops by. It'll be our own little secret." His eyes returned to me. Again with the grin.

My pulse battered the side of my neck as my mind scrambled for options on how to get out of this situation. But I knew if I was fortunate enough to escape, it would only be temporary—I'd be picked up by a cop within an hour. Frank used to work with the San Antonio Police, a patrolman for twenty years. He retired when he was shot in the left shoulder by a prostitute who was high on meth. Or so he said.

Too bad she couldn't have aimed about six inches lower.

From the very beginning he'd told me he had friends in all the right places. Cops, judges, lawyers, even folks working with CPS. If I were to ever make any outrageous allegations against him or his wife, no one would believe me. And once I was brought back to his home, he'd make sure I learned my lesson in a way I'd never forget. He said it was best just to play along, sit back, relax, and enjoy it, and then when I was eighteen I could move on.

"Ivy, are you hallucinating, girl?"

"Huh?"

"Those boys you left with—"

"How did you know I left with any boys? Never mind, it doesn't matter." He must have seen me get picked up by Billy and Matt down the street. He had eyes on me even when I thought he was off in another world.

"You sure you're not trippin' on shrooms? That's the big thing these days, teenagers trippin' on their shrooms." His eyebrows scrunched into a solid line of thick, greasy hair, a peppering of gray throughout.

“I’m not tripping on anything. And I’ve never done shrooms,” I said, looking around the renovated room for some type of weapon. My eyes only found a remote control and a bottle of lotion. “I’ve gone to the trouble of giving you a drawer full of beautiful clothes. Just on the other side of the bed. Take a look.”

I shuffled to the dresser, moving at a snail’s pace.

“Go on now. I got a screen just over there so you can change in private. Like a real woman.”

A real woman? He saw me as nothing more than an animal or some inanimate object—not even a human being, for chrissakes. Just a thing for him to use whenever he had a demented, perverted whim.

I closed my eyes, wondering how I could keep living this life. No family, no one who cared about my wellbeing.

A meaty paw locked onto my shoulder.

“Stop it,” I yelled without thinking.

I saw the fist a moment before it crushed my face.. An instant later, my brain flickered back to life as I stared at the twirling bright light.

“Get your ass up and put on this nightgown,” he growled, handing me a flimsy get-up that he’d pulled from the top drawer.

“Fuck. You.” Defiance raced through my bloodstream, even as my cheek felt like it was the size of a watermelon. I jumped to my feet in time to see another meaty fist on a direct path to my face. Ducking, I reared back and threw a roundhouse punch with everything I had.

“Ooh,” he said, grabbing his crotch as he went cross-eyed.

I just stood there for a second, astounded that I’d nailed his weak spot. Then I took off. I knew I’d have half the world after me, but I didn’t care. I’d go underground, hitchhike to another part of the country...anything to escape this torture and abuse.

Around the bed I went. I got to the ladder and turned to back my way down. But before I’d let go of the top rung, his hand had a vice-like grip on my wrist.

“Let me go, asshole.”

He started chuckling, his putrid breath spilling toxic air directly at my face. “You’ve really fucked up now, Ivy. I’m not going to be this nice, charming guy. We’re going to do this the nasty way.”

Leaning over, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and started yanking me upward. I screamed and flailed my arms. My fingers poked him in the eye, and he yelled. He released my hair—and for a moment I thought I was free—but he grabbed my forearm. “Let...go.” Using all of my weight, I yanked and pulled with all my might, desperate to break free.

Drool spilled from his mouth, his veiny face a beet red, as he struggled to maintain a solid grip.

*I can’t take this. I can’t take more abuse, another beating.*

I started crying as sheer panic set in, my whole body shaking

uncontrollably.

Logic and any type of clear thought on how I could escape were lost. Random images pummeled my mind. So many scenes from my childhood flashed before me in just a matter of seconds. And with no filter in place, it felt like a stake had just been driven into my heart. It all revolved around the shame of being a foster child. Kids teased me constantly. The name-calling, the whispers about my grooming and my personality, my lack of trust, even the lack of a parental role model to know what was right and wrong. And yes, all of my buried secrets. No matter where I went, whom I was with, I couldn't escape the abuse. How many times had I thought one of those incidents would result in my death? Too many to count. I would do anything to avoid another horror. Anything.

A scream seemed to come from outside of my body. A breath caught in my throat; I choked. Then I saw eyes of pure evil devouring every inch of me. From some place I didn't know existed, a bolt of energy shot through my body, and I jerked my arm with the power of a thousand men.

Frank lost his balance and tumbled through the hole just as I twisted out of the way, hanging from a single rung by my arm. The lard-ass got his arms caught in the ladder, and he landed squarely on the crown of his head, releasing a stifling gasp upon impact. His body slowly crumpled, as if his joints had melted.

And then there was silence. I could hear myself panting, but nothing from him. I jumped down from the ladder, leaned over, and found his eyes open, staring at the blank wall, but not blinking. No movement.

I jumped back a step.

For what seemed like an eternity, I just stood in the hallway and stared, wondering if he would somehow wake up and come after me.

And then it hit me. The cops would think that I had killed him. It wouldn't matter what he had done to me. I would be branded a murderer. From an unwanted foster kid to a killer. That was what I'd accomplished with the thirteen years of my life. I brought my hands to my face, stretching my mouth as wide as it would go, and screamed silently.

I knew I couldn't be there anymore. I couldn't be near Frank or Maybelle, or anywhere near the house. With tears streaming down my face, I ran out the front door. I didn't stop and catch my breath or talk to anyone. I just ran as fast and as far as my body could take me.

And that was the last time I ever saw Frank or his house.



*Present Day*

My cell phone rang. Eager for a reprieve from the heap of files sitting on my desk at Child Protective Services, I fished through my purse and tapped the green button.

“Did you get the alert?”

I could hear a siren in the background, and I momentarily pulled the phone away from my ear. “I’m sorry?”

“Ivy, this is Detective Radow—”

“Stan, I know it’s you. But I didn’t get the alert. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Crap. I don’t have time to tell the whole fuckin’ story.” I’d only known him for two months, but I was well familiar with his thick Brooklyn accent.

“Give me the ten-second version,” I said, lifting from my chair.

“Fuck,” he said. Then I heard tires screech. “Get the hell out of my way.”

“Stan?”

“Damn ducks crossing the road. You’d think the world was taken over by frickin’ animals.”

“The alert, Stan. What do I need to know?”

At that moment, my boss, Maud Hubbard, barged into my office saying something about a code red. That was our agency’s own internal signal for when one of our kids was involved in a potentially life-threatening situation. My pulse redlined in a matter of seconds.

Stan began to talk, but I couldn’t hear him over my coworkers jabbering away around me. I held a stiff hand up in their direction. “Sorry, Stan. Try again.”

“It’s a hostage situation.” It sounded like he had swallowed the phone. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes. Who’s involved?”

“It’s that Garza case you were telling me about last week. The dad, Matt, found out where his kid was staying and barged into the foster home. He’s holding everyone hostage—the foster mom, her two children, and his own son, Miguel. He’s got a gun, and he’s threatening to kill everyone in the house.”

I grabbed my purse and ran out of the office.

I skillfully weaved through coworkers, parents, and small children, my toned body barely breaking stride. I couldn’t help but think about Miguel Garza, the little ten-year-old I’d helped place with the Gideons. They had been known as one of the better foster families, at least according to the assessment of my coworker, Joanna Silva. Miguel was all mouth—maybe it

was a trait he'd inherited from his talkative father—but he was one of the sweetest little guys I'd ever been around.

“I'm in the area. I'll pick you up on the way,” Stan said.

Just before the elevator doors shut, Hubbard caught up to me and said, “The agency can't suffer another humiliation, Ivy. We need to protect our image.”

I ignored her plea and thought about Miguel on my trip to the ground floor.

“Stay here, I’ll get an update from the negotiator. All right?” Stan flicked his fingers against my arm.

I wasn’t offended. Everyone who knew Stan understood he was a little over the top in every aspect of his life.

“I’ll be right here,” I said, standing behind the yellow tape that surrounded the hostage team’s negotiating base.

Stan gave me the nod, and then his right eye twitched just before he walked off. I’d seen that happen before. It had something to do with stress. A detective within the homicide unit, Stan was my police-department liaison. If something bad went down with one of our kids, Stan was usually right there beside me.

Behind a barricade of six police cars, more than a dozen uniformed cops milled about. I also spotted a Hostage Rescue Team bus and a SWAT van. The SAPD was fully prepared for any situation. People could die. Kids. And that made my heart ache.

A cold breeze blew a lock of my frizzy, shoulder-length blond hair into my face. With temperatures still hovering at forty degrees and my hands tucked into my armpits, I didn’t bother fixing my hair. It had seen worse days.

“Hey.”

I turned to see Joanna Silva pulling up next to me.

“This was your case originally, right?” I asked.

She pressed her lips together and nodded, keeping her gaze on the cops. She had a cold stare on her plump face, but I was used to it. Unlike most of my coworkers, Joanna didn’t seem to have much compassion in her fireplug body. She seemed bitter...toward the biological parents, the agencies involved, even the kids.

Standing on my tiptoes, adding a couple of inches to my five-six frame, I was able to take in the Gideon home, a modest, one-story, brick structure that was as cookie cutter as they came—brown shutters, a single tree on one side of the front yard, and a front-facing, two-car garage. A blue minivan, which I assumed belonged to the Gideons, was parked in the driveway.

I heard a whistle and looked over to the HRT bus. Stan had just stepped down onto the concrete and was walking our way and waving us over at the same time. I lifted the tape up, but a tall officer quickly appeared.

“Sorry, miss, this space is off limits.”

“They’re with me,” Stan called out.

The officer shrugged and lifted the tape. I was halfway there when I realized Joanna wasn’t moving with me.

“What are you waiting on?”

“I don’t want to get involved, Ivy,” she said, reluctantly shuffling in my

direction. “This is now a job for the men and women who do the real dirty work.”

I ignored her excuse and practically pulled her over to Stan, who said, “Negotiator said that Matt Garza is on an emotional roller coaster. One minute he’s calm, talking about a future life with his kid and wife, and the next he’s crying and screaming, threatening to kill everyone because he knows he’ll never be able to get his family back together.”

A man wearing a SWAT jacket hopped out of the HRT bus and quickly rounded up three men and gave them instructions of some kind as they walked to the SWAT van.

“Is there something in the works?” I asked Stan. “Are you guys planning to raid the house?”

“Nothing is off the table at this point. We can’t let this nut job kill five people and then himself.”

“Something is about to go down?”

He raked his fingers through his hair, as thick and coarse as bear’s fur. “That’s not what I’m saying. We’re doing the best we can. The situation is fluid. We’re hoping that negotiations can end this before someone gets hurt.”

“So why did you call us over? Don’t you want to be in there, listening to your guy do his thing?” I pointed at the HRT bus.

“It’s a she. Theresa is the best negotiator we’ve got, but she’s not a social worker who knows Miguel and his family. We thought you ladies might be able to help calm the dad down some.”

I glanced at Joanna, who immediately threw up her hands. “No way I’m getting on a call with that man. I know what he’s capable of. He might slit my throat through the phone.”

I stuck a hand on my hip. “Really? You’re going to crawl into your hole and pretend this isn’t happening?”

She backed up a step. “I’m just sayin’...”

I could feel Stan’s eyes on us. He was probably baffled at this woman’s inability to step up when it mattered most. I know I was.

“I’ll do it. I’ll talk to him,” I said.

Joanna grabbed my arm. “No, Ivy. You barely know the guy.”

“I met him once. And I could feel his unease with life.”

“Ivy, you’re not equipped for this. This is much bigger than a kid being slapped around a little bit. That guy has a gun, and he might be high on meth.”

I paid no attention to her flippant attitude toward child abuse—the prevention of which was at the core of our jobs—and focused on her last statement. “I don’t recall reading or hearing that Matt Garza was on meth.”

She pursed her chubby lips.

“Joanna, what’s going on?”

She picked at her nails. “I saw it on my first in-home visit. He was smoking meth in the kitchen when I got there. He didn’t think I saw him toss his pipe out of the kitchen window, but I did. And he was beyond loopy.”

I turned to Stan. "So now we might have a meth-head to deal with."

"Motherf—!" He stopped short, biting his lower lip. "Okay, come with me, and let's see how Theresa wants to play this."

Two people were inside the bus: Theresa and a tech-head who ran the audio and video communications. She introduced him as Mino, and he stayed silent as the rest of us tried to figure out a peaceful end to the crisis.

After Stan explained our situation, Theresa looked directly at Joanna. "You know the dad the best of any of us, and the kid too, but you refuse to talk to the dad?" With shiny, brown hair that fell just below her shoulders and a flawless complexion, Theresa could have been a model in a different life. But right now, she looked decidedly pissed.

"I'm not really sure why I'm here." Joanna shuffled in one place, but her wide hips kept bumping into chairs. It felt extra cramped inside the bus, and the thick-chested Stan just added to the sensation. I tried to believe I didn't have issues with closed spaces.

"Look, it doesn't matter that Joanna isn't comfortable talking to Matt. I already said I'd do it." I held out my hand for the headset and mic that Theresa was holding.

"Okay. He's taking a leak right now, but he'll be back in a minute. I'll introduce you as one of the nice ladies who's been caring for Miguel. If we're lucky, maybe he'll release him."

"Wait," I said. "Where's Miguel's mom? What's her name?"

"Berta," Joanna said.

"We have a unit out to pick her up, but..." Theresa locked eyes with Stan.

"What is it?"

"They can't find her at work or home. The uniforms called her cell phone too, but no answer."

"Call again. She could really help," I said.

Stan jumped in. "Captain Herrera said they've called that number at least ten times in the last hour."

"Trace her GPS signal."

"Okay, okay, Ivy," Stan said, touching my elbow. "We're on it. Don't worry. Let's focus on what we can do right now while we search for Miguel's mom."

A moment later Theresa nodded at Mino. The line picked up, and all I could hear was distant yelling. The man's voice was muffled, but it was obvious he was highly agitated.

I looked at Theresa, who nodded, and Stan pointed at my headset. I slid it on and realized the sound was being played on speakers in the bus. Theresa pointed for me to put the mic up to my face.

"Matt, hey, this is Theresa," she said casually.

I heard in the background a woman yelling at Matt. I assumed it to be Mrs. Gideon. She was probably panicked with fright, for herself and the children in the house with this gun-toting dad who thought the world had done

him wrong.

“Matt, can you hear me? I want to help you out,” Theresa said, still with amazing calm.

A ruffling noise through the receiver, then Matt’s voice came through loud and clear. “If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’m going to make you eat my gun. Hear me, bitch?”

“Matt, Matt, everything okay?” Theresa asked.

A couple of ticks went by, and I held my breath, bracing for the worst—the sound of a gunshot.

“Yeah, I’m here. But I don’t know for how long,” he said.

“We’ve got all the time in the world, Matt. No worries.”

“Get back in your room, or—”

“Please, please, you must listen.” Mrs. Gideon again, this time closer to the phone. “Tommy and Monique need food and water. Miguel does too. Tommy is sick.”

Matt screamed in frustration.

I glanced at Stan, who was shaking his head.

“Matt, hey, let me help you out,” Theresa said. “Food, drink. Whatever you want. It’s yours.”

“I’m hungry for pizza.”

“We can do that. What kind?”

“Thin crust, but loaded with everything, including anchovies.”

Stan started punching the order on his cell phone.

“And give me a two-liter bottle of orange pop. I like that stuff.”

“Will do. I know a great pizza place about three miles from here. My team will call it in,” she said.

“I’ll take it.”

“Do you want to ask Miguel if he’d like a special kind of pizza?” I asked.

Theresa held up a quick hand, shaking her head at me.

“Who is this?” Matt barked.

“I was just about to tell you,” Theresa said, giving me a glare, “that I’ve asked a lady named Ivy to join our conversation. She knows Miguel from CPS, and I thought it would be helpful for Miguel to hear a familiar voice, let him know that everything will be fine.”

A few seconds of silence.

“Matt, you want everything to be okay with Miguel, right?” Theresa prodded.

He let out a heavy sigh. I couldn’t help but jump in. “Matt, we’re talking about your son. You love him. He’s part of you.”

Another stern look from Theresa.

“Hmmm. I guess it’s okay to talk to him. He’s just sitting over in the corner with his knees up against his chest and staring at nothing really. Not saying much.”

Matt’s intensity had dropped a couple of notches, but I worried that

Miguel was in a state of shock.

“Hey, Miguel,” Matt said. “Got a lady here on the phone who says she knows you. Wanna talk to her?”

I couldn’t hear a response.

“Miguel, do you hear me? Answer your father,” he said.

A meek voice responded, but I couldn’t detect the words spoken.

“You’re mumbling. Real men don’t mumble. Speak up, son.”

“I said I don’t want to talk.”

“He said he doesn’t want to talk to you,” Matt relayed, although we had heard Miguel’s comment.

“Can you just give him the phone?” I asked.

Another pause, and I hoped like hell I wasn’t making him angrier.

“She asked if you want your own pizza. What’s your favorite?”

Matt didn’t know his own son’s favorite pizza? Not surprising really. My experiences had shown that some parents were so distraught over their own dramas that they ignored the needs and desires of their own flesh and blood.

“Pepperoni,” he said.

“You tell her.”

“Hi, I want pepperoni pizza please,” the young boy said into the phone.

Stan nodded, pecking away at his phone.

“Great, Miguel. We’ll order that and have it to you and your dad in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He still had his manners. Amazing.

Just then, the van door swung open. It was the SWAT officer I’d seen earlier. He had a thin mustache and a toothpick hanging out of his mouth. But it was his menacing scowl that made it seem like he was prepared for a battle against evil..

I tried to ignore his ominous presence and focus on a little boy who needed my help.

“So let’s talk for a minute. I’m Ivy. Do you remember me from a few weeks ago?”

“Uh, yeah, only because you have a weird name. Oh, sorry. Momma would say that wasn’t nice.”

I chuckled. “That’s fine, Miguel. Ivy *is* a strange name. But you know, we all have something that is unique about us. I remember that you like toy trucks. Especially ones that have ladders on them.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to be a fireman when you grow up?”

“Maybe. It would be kind of cool, don’t you think?”

“Firemen are brave, and they help other people. You want to help other people?”

“I just want to climb the ladders and put out fires.” He paused for a second. “Dad, where’s Momma?”

Silence for more than a second, which led to quick looks around the van, SWAT man included. Joanna avoided eye contact and picked at her nails.

“Momma isn’t coming home, Miguel. She’s gone to a better place, son.”

Miguel started to cry, and I could feel Joanna’s heavy hand on my shoulder. I felt my heart sink. Theresa made a signal to Mino.

“Are we on mute?” Stan asked in a low voice. Theresa nodded, and he continued. “Sounds like Matt might have done something to his wife. We need more resources on this. I’m going to step out, talk to the captain. Meanwhile, see if you can get more information out of him.”

Theresa huffed out a breath. “I know you need it, Stan, but we’re trying to keep people from dying in that house. We’ll do the best we can.”

“Big boys don’t cry, Miguel,” Matt said over the speakers.

“But I want Momma. Where is she?” he said through sobs.

A growl. “Just shut the hell up, okay? Daddy’s got a lot of pressure. Don’t add to it, do you hear me?”

“Yes sir.”

Stan exited the van, leaving the door cracked. SWAT man licked his lips, as if he wanted to offer an opinion, but Theresa raised a hand: *not now*.

“Speak up, Miguel. I didn’t raise a pussy for a son, did I?”

“No.”

“And what the hell do *you* want?” Matt shouted.

“My son...he needs help,” Mrs. Gideon pleaded. “He’s hypoglycemic. He’s starting to sweat profusely, and he’s got blurred vision..”

“Fuck. I’m sick of dealing with you and this whole fucking thing. I should just put a bullet in your head—all of your heads—and be done with it. Do you hear me?”

“Oh, please no. I beg of you. Please.”

More yelling and muffled noises and then a thud, as if someone had been pushed into a wall.

“Matt, Matt, please calm down,” Theresa said, just as Stan stepped back inside the van.

“This bitch thinks I’m a hotel and a doctor’s office. Leave me the fuck alone.”

I could hear Mrs. Gideon whimper.

“Matt, this isn’t a big deal. Just ask her where the medicine is, and let her give her son the medicine he needs.”

Matt said to Mrs. Gideon, “This cop says you can just give it to him yourself. Where is it?”

“We ran out of glucose tablets. I just need to get to a pharmacy.”

“Dammit, everything’s a problem. It doesn’t even matter. We’re all going straight to hell. Why not just start right now?”

Screams from over the phone.

“No, Matt,” Theresa yelled out, and I couldn’t help but gasp.

For the next few seconds, it was nothing more than chaos. Yelling, crying,



cursing, while Theresa and I tried to intercede, to bring calm to the situation, or even a brief pause.

SWAT man pulled Stan over to the side and started doing a lot of pointing, at us and at Stan. I began to wonder if a raid on the house might be our only hope to save at least a few lives.

Stan stepped over and held up his phone inches from my face. I then blurted out the message, "Pizza and soda pop are here."

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**AT Last**

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# Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

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